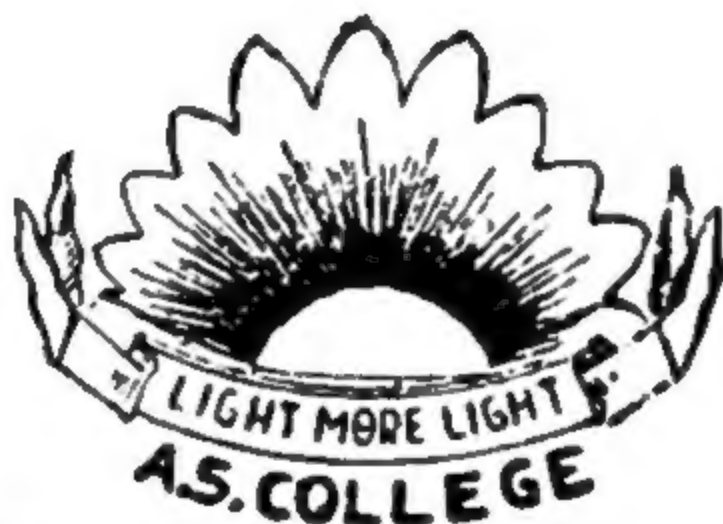


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DEATH DISPOSES

BY

MAX DALMAN

WARD, LOCK & CO. LIMITED

LONDON AND MELBOURNE

First published . . . 1945

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CHAPTER I

PRELUDE TO DEATH

RAISING himself a little in his invalid chair, James Henstone felt again in the breast pocket of his coat. Under his fingers the long envelope crackled reassuringly, and a queer smile overspread his face. It was not a pleasant smile; but then, Henstone was not a pleasant man. Those inclined to take a charitable view might excuse his warped nature on the ground of the long illness which had kept him helpless from the time when an unexpected legacy had first made him a rich man. Those who knew him better would have said that he had always been naturally cruel, and that money had merely given him more power to gratify his taste. He himself was accustomed to say that he liked to study the emotional reactions of mankind; and the long document in his pocket was calculated to provoke quite a number of reactions.

That was why he smiled. It was a weapon capable of causing trouble to at least three people; and that two of the three were his only near relatives rather added to his enjoyment than otherwise. He took the paper from his pocket and eyed it for a moment while he still smiled. Then, reaching up, he pressed one of the three bell-pushes on the wall beside him, and leaned back, fondling the envelope in his hands.

The response was prompt. Only a minute or two later the door opened silently, and a young man entered, carrying a tray. Between him and the invalid there was sufficient resemblance to suggest their relationship of uncle and nephew, but there the likeness ended. Not only was Mark

Henstone as fine a specimen physically as his uncle was a complete wreck; but the similarities of their features seemed rather to accentuate the difference in the impressions their faces conveyed. Strangely enough, it was in the expression of the young and healthy man that a close observer would have detected the most signs of suffering. There was a curiously impassive look about it, as though years of self-imposed restraint had brought him to the state in which internal emotions produced no corresponding outward change; and even the dark, deeply-set eyes scarcely varied from their look of insensate brooding.

Without speaking, he crossed the room and placed the tray on the wheeled table beside the window. His uncle glanced at it and frowned slightly. It contained only a medicine glass, a jug of water, and two bottles, one of them a warning blue, and bearing in red the words "The Linament—POISON." The other was completely filled with a pearly, almost colourless, fluid, and was the dose which, however undesirably, had been the means of keeping the invalid alive for a number of years.

James Henstone eyed his nephew with a look of patient reproof as he turned to face the chair.

"My dear Mark," he complained, "have you forgotten that Dr. Wilton changed my medicine this morning? The next dose is in an hour's time, Mark, as you should be aware. . . . Are you trying to kill me, Mark?"

The young man made no answer beyond a slight inclination of the head. He merely turned and picked up the tray again from the table. Henstone made an irritable motion with his hand.

"Leave it," he commanded. "I wanted to talk to you."

Mark replaced the tray. He stood waiting, with something of the impassivity in his manner of a well-trained servant. The older man eyed him with an expression of curiosity for a moment before he spoke.

"I wonder, Mark, if you have ever wanted to kill me?" he

said reflectively. "I do not say 'whether you have wished me dead'—because, my dear boy, I am quite assured that that is your normal state of mind. . . . But have you, I wonder, ever toyed with the idea of doing just that little bit necessary to ensure my permanent removal? And, if so, what stopped you?"

He paused; but his nephew gave no sign.

"Fear, perhaps? The percentage of murderers who escape conviction in this country is not, of course, reassuring; and, as my heir, suspicion might fall on you. . . . And yet, to kill a man in my condition is so simple that the question of murder might never arise. Natural death—accident—suicide—how easily any of them might be contrived. . . . More probably, like your silly mother, you hold opinions about divine justice and right——?"

Mark's face had twitched almost imperceptibly at the last words; but the older man had noticed it. He smiled a little in satisfaction and went on.

"Yes, Mark, your mother had odd notions. She believed, up to the time of her death, in a beneficent providence and the final triumph of right—even on this imperfect earth. Well, she is now in heaven—a region, I must say, about which I feel the gravest doubts. Apart from that, what good did it do to her? She lived miserably and died young——"

Mark Henstone shifted his position slightly. He took a half step forward, and his knuckles whitened. Trifling though the movement was, it seemed to frighten the invalid. He changed the subject.

"As you know, Mark, your mother preferred your father to me. Under the circumstances, I think it was rather generous of me to assume the burden of your education. . . . I have brought you up to serve me. No doubt your education has been lacking in breadth and has given you few practical qualifications. . . . But there. It is too late to speak of that now, unfortunate though it may prove. You are thirty-one, I think, Mark? A little late in life to make a start

in modern conditions from something rather less than scratch. I wonder, Mark, if you are under any illusions as to your chances of obtaining any reasonable employment?"

His nephew spoke for the first time.

"None," he said, without visible emotion.

"You have, of course, your health and brawn. . . . Otherwise, any hope of a comparatively comfortable existence depends entirely on retaining your employment here for the brief span left to me, and then, if I have made no will, of inheriting my money and living happily ever after. I am afraid, Mark, that you would not have shed many tears at my funeral!"

Mark made no comment. With a sudden gesture, Henstone held up the envelope.

"Mark," he said, "I have bad news for you. . . . I have made my will."

He waited for a moment as if to note the effect of the announcement upon the young man. Once again he was disappointed. With a wave of irritation he noted that there was not the slightest apparent change of expression in the other's face.

"Yes, Mark," he resumed, "this is my will—or to be more exact, the rough draft of what is to be my will. It may not have escaped your attention that Mr. Bembridge called yesterday? In his capacity of solicitor, Mark. We discussed matters quite fully, and you can have no hope of upsetting its provisions. . . . And, by this will, Mark, you get——" He paused, like one relishing the pleasure of prolonging the suspense. "You get, Mark—nothing at all," he concluded.

His nephew merely nodded a little wearily as though giving his assent to some trifling proposition.

"Nothing at all, Mark. . . . Everything goes, conditionally, to your dear cousin, Francis Carlton. . . . He will get your money—as well as your girl. Doesn't that please you?"

He waited again, as if expecting some outburst or appeal

but none came. His nephew merely glanced for a moment at the envelope; then his eyes returned to the invalid's face.

"That was all you wanted?" he asked.

James Henstone laughed, but there was a distinct edge of annoyance in his voice as he replied.

"Really, Mark, you are a disappointment to me! Where you acquired that Sphinx-like command of your features I cannot even conjecture. Your mother, if anything, was exceptionally emotional. I remember when she came to me after your father's death——" Once again his nephew moved slightly, and he broke off. "No, Mark, that is not quite all. As I said, I expect Bembridge to call with the will for my signature at half-past eleven. See that everything is ready. Warn Martha and Miss Vernon that they will be required as witnesses." He laughed. "That, though perhaps they will not realize it, means that they do not benefit any more than you do, Mark! You understand?"

"Yes," Mark replied simply. "You don't want anything more?"

"My dear Mark!" There was a pained note in the voice. "You are becoming forgetful. . . . You have not yet poured out my medicine."

"You said that you would not be taking it until eleven."

"I also said that you could pour it out. Carefully, my dear boy. . . . A little too much might produce deplorable results to one in my delicate state of health——" And perhaps, Mark, you will rub my wrist——"

His nephew moved across the room and picked up the blue poison bottle. Carrying it in his hand he returned to the chair, drew the cork and poured out a little into his palm. Impersonally, as though he were dealing with a piece of wood, he rubbed the arm which James Henstone extended to him, wiped his hands carefully upon his handkerchief, and replaced the bottle on the tray. He bent over it for a moment. Though he could see nothing but his nephew's broad back, Henstone watched every movement with half-

closed eyes. He heard the drawing of the cork; the clink of the bottle against the glass; the gurgle of the liquid. There was a pause. The liquid gurgled again; then there was the trickle of water from the glass. Mark moved round, as if to wheel the table over to the chair; but the invalid stopped him.

"Leave it, Mark—leave it! The light through the glass—charming, is it not? What does one of our modern poets say about lovely things? 'The sunlight through a glass of marmalade'——"

"That is all?" Mark interrupted, turning a stony face towards him.

"Except, Mark, that Francis Carlton is to come here as soon as he arrives. It will be interesting to see how he receives the great news. . . . Less stoically, I think, than you have done, Mark. And, who knows? Perhaps with no greater pleasure. . . . Yes, Mark. That is all. Thank you."

As the door closed, Henstone smiled to himself. Familiar as he was with his nephew's inscrutability, he had not expected from him any much greater reaction than he had obtained. And yet, unless he was very much mistaken, Mark's feelings about what he had just heard must have been intense. In character, his nephew bore a distinct resemblance to his dead mother, however well he might disguise it, and it was for that very reason, that James Henstone, who had never forgiven an injury real or imagined in his life, took an especial pleasure in torturing him. But Francis Carlton, his next victim, had not Mark's self-control, and might be expected to give more positive results.

He smiled again, and leaning back, let his eyes rest on the sparkling diamond of light focused in the water jug. It was a fact that he got from it a genuine æsthetic pleasure, scarcely less than he did sadistically from the mental torment of other people. Then his eyes shifted to the glass, and he frowned a little.

A knock sounded at the door. He lifted himself a little in anticipation.

"Come in!" he commanded.

Francis Carlton entered. Though about the same age as his cousin, he was, in most respects as different from him as could well be imagined. The slight, boyish figure, and the brisk, light step with which he entered the room marked the contrast offered by the vivacious features and alert bearing. He smiled cheerfully at his uncle.

"You sent for me, sir?" he asked. "I hope you're better to-day?"

Henstone eyed him benignly. There was a definite satisfaction for him in the obvious high spirits of his nephew—or rather, in the prospect of the shock he was shortly to administer to them. He pointed to a chair.

"Yes, my boy. . . . Sit down. I want to talk to you. . . . And how is Kathleen this morning?"

"Oh——" His nephew flushed. "Very well. Asked after you, sir. . . . I just happened to call there on my way——"

"I had supposed so. . . . One of the things which commends me to you, Francis, is that your thoughts are so easy to read. You are very different in that respect from Mark. . . . And, by the way, what sort of terms are you on with your cousin?"

The young man frowned and shifted unhappily in his chair.

"Oh, well——" he said doubtfully. "I suppose you know how it is, Uncle. . . . But it wasn't my fault. Or Kathleen's, of course. He simply misunderstood her feelings towards him. She was never really in love with him——"

"Exactly. But Mark thought she was. And he still takes it to heart? I am afraid that he broods too much over these things. He might be a nasty enemy. And, if anything happened to me——" He broke off. "You and Kathleen had, I believe, some intention of getting married in the near future?"

"You see, it's positively forced upon us, sir," Francis explained a little hesitantly. "Her family doesn't exactly approve of me—in fact, she's left them. She's no money of her own. The best thing to do seems to be to get things settled."

"Settled?" Henstone repeated slowly. "But how, Francis? . . . It was about your prospects that I wished to speak when I sent for you this morning. As things are, Francis, you hold a position—a sufficiently lucrative position—in my firm."

"You've been most generous, sir—" his nephew began. "Yes, I'm pretty sure we can manage on that. It might be a pinch at first, but we shouldn't mind——"

Henstone held up his hand. "Let me speak," he said. "I was going to say that, though you have received a salary from the firm, up to date you have had no expectations under my will. In fact, there has been no will. Upon my death, Francis, you would be very reliant upon the generosity of your second cousin, Mark—who might, or might not, feel disposed to continue you in your present post."

"Mark feels very bitter, sir." A shadow crossed the young man's face. "I hope he wouldn't take advantage—I don't know. We've never understood each other very well."

Henstone shook his head. "Mark has, I am afraid, a brooding nature. He is not a person to forget a fancied wrong easily. . . . You would not trust him?"

"I don't know, sir. . . . I don't like to say anything——"

"To say anything against him? No. But I can see you have doubts. And it is for that reason I have decided to change the position and to make some provision for your future."

The young man looked at him eagerly. His lips opened, but Henstone continued before he could speak.

"Yes. I have decided to change everything. I have made my will."

He saw the quick flash of hope in the other's eyes, and suppressed a smile. He knew that it would not have been the right kind of smile, all the less so because his nephew at that moment reminded him strongly of his late brother-in-law, whom he had hated. But it was a part of his pleasure to prolong the agony. His eyes wandered round the room for an instant, and rested on the medicine glass. He went off at a tangent.

"Francis, my boy, I wish that you would pour a little more water into that glass. . . . Mark, I am afraid, is getting very neglectful. Or perhaps he wishes an old man to die. A little more water, Francis."

Like a man in a dream Carlton moved over to the table and shifted the medicine bottle to one side to reach the handle of the jug.

"Yes, Francis. . . . Under my will, I leave you—everything."

There was a crash as the medicine bottle overturned. The young man faced him, white with the shock from the suddenness of the announcement.

"Everything!" he gasped.

"All my property, real and personal. . . . You will be a rich man, Francis—when I am dead.

"Sir," Francis stammered. He seemed to be trying to find words to express his thanks. Then another thought seemed to occur to him. "But, sir—Mark——"

"Your cousin can, no doubt, rely upon your generosity. The roles will be reversed, Francis. He will have to come cap in hand to you—not you to him. . . . No, Francis. It is useless to protest. My mind is completely made up. My whole fortune goes to you."

Perhaps the young man realized the uselessness of argument. At least he did not press the point.

"I don't—I don't know how to thank you, sir——" he began.

"That is unnecessary. . . . There is just another point,

Francis. In view of what I am doing for you in the future, I do not feel able to retain your services in the firm. You have, of course, no contract. You will leave at the end of next week."

On the part of Francis Carlton at least, Henstone could not complain of any lack of emotion. There was utter dismay on his face.

"But, sir," he protested at last. "There's Kathleen——"

"That, of course, is unfortunate. . . . But no doubt it is merely a postponement. A change would do you good, my dear boy. And sometimes I am inclined to agree with the old saying about hasty marriages——"

"But—but we'd arranged to get married in a fortnight," Francis stammered the words desperately. Previously he had heard of his relative's capriciousness; but he had never experienced it. It was still incredible. "You—you can't mean it, sir," he pleaded. "You don't understand——"

"My dear Francis, my mind is made up. Under my will, you will inherit everything. . . . Who knows? It may not be long. I am a sick man, Francis, a sick man. . . . And, I must say, Francis, that I should have expected a little more gratitude. . . . But, in the meantime, it will do you good to lead a less sheltered life. Newley is coming this morning. I shall give him instructions to dismiss you. Your marriage must wait."

"Sir," Carlton begged. "I don't mind about the money. . . . I'd gladly give it up if—— Don't you see, sir, that I've got to have some money now, just to carry on, until——"

"Until I die? And I may live for years?" Henstone raised his eyebrows. "Really, Francis, you might seem a little less regretful that I still retain my precarious hold upon life. And besides, I might die to-night! The speculation will provide you with a little excitement, Francis!"

There was a moment's silence. His nephew was no longer looking at him. He was staring towards the window, with a queer, strained expression on his face.

"That, I think, is all, Francis," Henstone said after a pause. "I am tired. . . . You may leave me. . . . What is that envelope you are carrying? Something for me?"

The young man looked at it for a second dazedly; then handed it over without a word.

"Ah. The proofs from the photographers. . . . Thank you. . . . And, Francis, you have still not done as I requested. A little more water in the medicine, please."

Francis obeyed like an automaton, seeming to fumble with the jug and glass as though he had not complete control over his hands. It was a minute before he turned to the old man with a final desperate appeal.

"But, sir, if you knew just how much it means to me at this time——"

"That is enough, Francis. The matter is settled." Henstone frowned wearily. "You are tiring me. . . . Tell Higson that Mr. Newley is to come to me as soon as he arrives."

With a very different step from that with which he had entered the young man moved towards the door. Henstone had closed his eyes; but he heard him pause for an instant on the threshold. Then the door closed behind him.

Henstone smiled and opened the flap of the envelope in his hand. It was among his peculiarities that he liked to contemplate his own face, even in a mirror, and photographs were an obsession. He looked at each of them, studying them feature by feature, and he was still busy when the door opened on his third visitor. This time it was a man of nearly his own age. His black hair was shot with grey, but his eyes were bright and keen. He seemed to take in the whole room at a glance as he moved towards the chair where the invalid lay.

"You wanted me, Mr. Henstone?" he asked. There was no trace in his manner of either fear or subservience; if anything there was a trace of contempt, as if he thought his employer rather less than his equal. Henstone did not resent it. He smiled blandly in welcome.

"Yes, my dear Newley," he said. "Sit down. . . . Oh, if you would please put these on the table for me——?"

Newley took the photographs and obeyed, shrugging his shoulders as he saw what they were. He seated himself comfortably and lit a cigarette.

"Well?" he asked.

"Newley," Henstone closed his eyes wearily. "Newley, you're to fire Francis Carlton at the end of this week."

The manager's jaw dropped slightly. Used as he was to his employer's eccentricities, this was unexpected.

"Why?" he demanded bluntly. "He's doing pretty well."

Henstone's lips tightened. "Sack him at once!" he snapped. "You heard me say so. Your business is to do as you're told."

"If I did, you wouldn't have a business," Newley answered coolly. "Oh. Very well."

"A little experiment, Newley," Henstone smiled. "I feel the need of a mental stimulant from time to time—something to show that I am still a power for good or evil. . . . You know, there's a certain piquancy in living with relations who most fervently wish one dead!"

Newley made no comment. His bright eyes studied the other as if he was a curious and rather objectionable insect.

"To-day," Henstone said after a long pause, still leaning back with closed eyes, "I have made my will——"

"You told me yesterday——"

"It disinherits my nephew and gives everything to Francis. To keep the balance even, I am sacking Francis—who wants to get married. And they both wish me dead!" He looked up and smiled. "Both."

Newley shrugged. "That's not my affair," he said. "I'll sack Carlton. . . . Now, about those figures. You said you didn't quite understand——"

"I'm tired. . . . You'd better write them down. . . . Leave them——"

His voice trailed away into silence and his eyes closed

again wearily. Newley glanced at him without alarm. It was a peculiarity of his employer's condition that he was liable to doze off from time to time, generally for a few minutes after any particular excitement. With a shrug of his shoulders, the manager produced a note-book and began to write. Henstone was still sleeping five minutes later when he left.

CHAPTER II

AN EMPTY GLASS

PRECISELY at two minutes to eleven, Celia Vernon typed the final words of her last letter and added it to the finished pile. Gathering the sheets together she moved towards the door with the unhurried speed of a person who has exactly enough time. She had been James Henstone's secretary for only a few days, but it had been quite long enough for her to learn that when her employer specified eleven o'clock he expected her to be knocking on the door precisely when the clock was striking. And though not particularly attached either to James Henstone or the job, she had for the present sufficient reason to endure them.

The room where the invalid generally reclined in the day-time lay at the opposite end of the long house. To reach it one needed just over a minute from the office; but this time she was interrupted. Higson, the butler, hurried up to her as she was on the point of crossing the main entrance hall.

"Excuse me, miss." There was a suggestion of disturbance in his manner which was quite unlike him. "Perhaps you could help me . . . Miss Bramley is here, and insists on seeing Mr. Henstone at once. I'm afraid, miss, that——"

Celia glanced at the clock. It was just on the hour.

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"Well? Can't she?" she demanded.

"Mr. Henstone would be seriously annoyed, miss, if I admitted her without instructions . . . And Mr. Carlton this morning, miss . . . He seemed very upset when he went out. I'm afraid that there may have been some unpleasantness."

Celia's lips pursed into an unladylike whistle. Her sympathies were very strongly with the butler who, she had gathered, was expected to know by instinct what his employer did or did not want at any given moment. And, since she always listened to gossip on principle, though she was not well posted on details, she had received from the housekeeper a very fair idea of the situation which existed between the relatives. Undoubtedly it was a case for tact and caution.

"Trouble, you think?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so, miss. . . . The young lady seems very agitated——"

The hall clock struck. Celia made up her mind.

"Ask her to wait a moment. I'm due with Mr. Henstone now. I can mention it to him and see what he says."

"Thank you, miss." The butler was obviously relieved at having shifted responsibility. "I'll explain to her——"

"There's no one with him now?"

"No, miss. Mr. Newley came out a few minutes ago. I think he is telephoning, miss."

"That's all right." Celia glanced down the hall. "By the way, where is she?"

The butler also turned and looked. Cautiously, if without strict attention to good manners, he had left the visitor on the doorstep. At the far end of the entrance lobby the front door stood open, but there was no sign of anyone.

"Perhaps she's gone, miss." His tone implied that that was too much to hope for. "But from what she said to me——"

"She couldn't have slipped in anyhow?"

"Impossible, miss. I was just coming to you, miss——"

Celia was suddenly aware that time was flying. Even Kathleen Bramley might not be regarded as an adequate excuse for unpunctuality.

"Go and look . . . I must dash along."

It was several minutes past the proper time. She tore down the passage, reached the door a little breathlessly and knocked. In the room, someone was moving; but there was no answer. He could not be asleep. She knocked again, waited a moment, then put her ear to the woodwork and listened. The sound had stopped. In desperation she gripped the handle and turned it. The door did not yield, even when she exerted all her strength. It was evidently locked. More than a little puzzled, she tried the handle again as uselessly as before. She turned and looked over her shoulder.

Higson was standing at the far end of the passage waiting. Either he had found the missing visitor or he had given her up. She made a gesture beckoning him; then hurried forward to meet him.

"Higson, the door's locked!" she burst out. "I've knocked, and there's no answer, although I heard someone walking about——"

"But Mr. Henstone can't walk, miss."

"No. . . . I might have been mistaken about that. . . . But he might be ill?"

"It's very queer, miss. . . . The door, miss. He'd never lock that——"

"Of course it's queer." Celia was getting more than a little impatient. "But what are we to do?"

It was precisely the question that Higson did not want to answer. For there was just a chance that Mr. Henstone for once in his life had locked the door, and refused to answer out of the perversity which was his chief characteristic. If that were so, it was unwise to disturb him. But if not——

"Your visitor——" Celia suddenly broke in on his thoughts.

"She's gone, miss——"

"She's not. She's there——"

Celia pointed. Kathleen Bramley was just at the end of the passage. Her face was very pale, and her agitation was obvious. Celia glanced down the passage, then back at the butler before advancing to intercept her.

"Good morning," she said briskly. "I'm Mr. Henstone's secretary. Miss Bramley, isn't it? I understand that you wanted to see him. . . . You have no appointment?"

"No—— I——" Kathleen Bramley faltered. "Not—— not exactly. But I've got to see him. I must see him at once. . . . It's terribly important I must!"

Celia suppressed a sigh. Secretaries, who exist largely to serve as a soft but immovable cushion between the world and busy men, know that almost all interviews are important to those who seek them. And in the back of her mind was the worry of the locked door.

"You couldn't come later?" she suggested. "Perhaps I could arrange an appointment——"

"I've got to see him. Now. Every minute's important——"

"Well, I'll do my best." Celia's smile was forced. "If you wouldn't mind waiting——"

She ushered the girl into the first room that came handy, saw her safely seated and hurried out. Glancing over her shoulder she noticed that the visitor had already risen and was pacing to and fro before the window. She could not worry about that. Higson was where she had left him. Evidently in a crisis he was one of those helpless men who wait to be told what to do.

"Higson, we've got to do something. . . . Mr. Henstone may be ill. If not, why doesn't he answer? He was expecting me at eleven. It's ten past now."

"He might be asleep, miss . . . He docs doze off now and then."

"With the door locked?"

"Never, miss. . . . You're sure it was locked?"

"I tried it twice. . . . Might have stuck. You'd better try yourself."

The butler followed her without enthusiasm. He wished to take as little part in the proceedings as possible. This time, Celia scarcely troubled to give the merest perfunctory rap on the woodwork before she turned the handle without waiting for an answer; then she pushed with all her strength. The door opened instantly and she almost fell headlong.

"What——? I could have sworn——"

The words died on her lips. Higson, waiting prudently in the background ready to retire at the first sarcastic words, saw her astonishment give place to a look of horror. Every vestige of colour had left her face.

"Oh! What——? He's dying!"

Before the butler could move she had darted into the room and was bending over the chair where the sick man lay. He caught a glimpse of Henstone's livid face and glazing eyes, and heard his gasping breath. But he was still in the doorway when the girl turned to him urgently.

"Higson! Get a doctor. At once! Get Mr. Mark. Hurry!"

The butler hesitated only a moment before he started off up the corridor at an undignified run. He snatched the receiver and snapped the number of Henstone's own doctor. It seemed an age before anyone replied.

"Dr. Wilton? This is Mr. Henstone's butler speaking. . . . He's very ill, sir. Dying perhaps. . . . Thank you, sir."

Only a minute or two had elapsed since the secretary had called him. Slamming back the receiver, he hesitated a moment. In all probability the library was the likeliest place to find Mark Henstone. He was just moving across

towards it when the door opened and the young man himself came out.

"Mr. Mark!" In his agitation he failed to modulate his voice to its usual discreet tone. "Your uncle, sir! He's ill—dying, sir! Quick, sir. . . . I rang for the doctor."

But Mark Henstone did not stir. He looked like a ghost.

"My uncle? What——?"

"I don't know, sir. We went in and there he was. Hurry, sir!"

Mark Henstone suddenly came to life. Without further questions he was racing towards Henstone's room. Higson, already breathless, caught him up only when he halted in the doorway, staring into the room.

The first glance was enough to show him that he had come too late. James Henstone was lying very still. His head had fallen awkwardly to one side, and his face was already assuming the waxen look of death. Evidently half-fainting, Celia Vernon had sunk into a chair beside him. With one hand she was covering her eyes; in the other, she still held precariously a half-filled glass of water. Mark sprang forward, and in a moment was bending over the dead man. The butler followed more slowly. He gently took the glass of water from the girl's hand and placed it on the tray, giving a single look at the still form in the chair before he turned soothingly to the secretary.

"Lie back a minute, miss. . . . You'll feel better soon."

"He—he died," she said weakly. "Almost as soon as you went. He died. . . . I've—I've never seen anyone die——"

"Yes, miss," Higson comforted her. "Don't worry, miss."

Mark had been standing beside the chair with his head bent. He turned as the girl spoke again.

"He—he was breathing queerly. I tried to give him some water. He spoke a few words——"

"He spoke, Miss Vernon?" Mark looked at her keenly, turning from the dead man. "You heard——?"

"He said: 'Doctor . . . poison . . . medicine.' Then he stopped. I thought he was dying then. But he half sat up . . . Then he said: 'Mark . . . the girl . . . Murdered'."

"He said that?" Mark's face was as white as paper. "You're sure?"

"Yes. . . . He was breathing dreadfully, but he—he smiled." A shudder shook her. "And then: 'Money—diddled—Old will—Broughton House—strip paper—wall.' And then he was dead."

Mark stood staring down at her. There was a sound of voices outside. Newley and Bembridge hurried in.

"He's—he's dead," Mark said in a curious voice. He seemed to be defending himself against an unspoken accusation. "When we got here——"

Newley glanced at him without answering and hurried over. He took one wrist between his fingers and bent down listening. Then rose slowly.

"He's dead," he repeated, and there seemed to be an accusation in his eyes as he looked at Mark. "Who found him?"

"Miss Vernon was here when he died, sir," Higson answered.

Newley's gaze fixed itself upon the girl compellingly.

"He said—he said he was poisoned. By the medicine——"

She stopped abruptly. Her senses were coming back to her and she realized that what followed was practically an accusation of the young man before her.

"Yes? Yes, Miss—Miss Vernon?" Newley prompted sharply. "What else? It may be very important——"

"He asked for his nephew——"

"You mean he spoke his name?" Some intuition seemed to tell the manager of the fact which she was seeking to disguise. "What did he say? 'Mark'?"

"Yes," Celia admitted. "He spoke of a will——"

She broke off at the look of horror which showed not

only on the face of Newley, but on that of the lawyer. Both had turned, and were looking at Mark without speaking. There was the sound of a car in the drive outside. Newley drew a deep breath.

"That'll be the doctor. . . . Bring him here at once, Higson." He turned to Mark as the butler went out. "You've sent for the police?"

It was almost a command, and the young man evidently sensed the implication behind it. He winced, and a flush slowly spread over his face.

"The police?" he echoed. "No. . . . But—but my uncle's been ill for years. . . . Is it necessary——?"

"I'm afraid you'll find it is, Mr. Henstone." There was a grim undertone in the manager's voice and he looked at the young man sternly. "After what Miss Vernon has just said—and after what Mr. Henstone said to me this morning."

"What my uncle said to you?"

Mark Henstone's face had resumed its expressionless mask, and his voice was well controlled, though it trembled a little with some suppressed emotion. He met the manager's accusing eyes squarely.

"Ycs," Newley rejoined. "Your uncle told me he was about to make a will. And its provisions. He implied—— Well, I don't think I should shrink from any investigation if I were you."

"Do I understand that you're accusing me," Mark spoke quite quietly, "of murdering my uncle?"

"He's taken his medicine." Newley pointed to the table. "It was already poured out when I came in. Who poured it?"

"I did. . . . But if you'll look, he's hardly taken any of it——"

"But—but he had!" Celia burst out. "That is only water—I tried to give him some. But—but before that the glass was empty."

"Empty. . . . Evidently your uncle took his medicine—at the right time. He died just afterwards. And——"

The appearance of the doctor in the doorway made him break off. He took in the little group at a glance, and saw, too, perhaps, that there was something in the air.

"Sorry to hear this," he said soothingly. "Sorry to hear this. Shouldn't have thought it. Still, an invalid for years——"

"Dr. Wilton, I've told Mr. Mark Henstone that I think he should send for the police," Newley broke in.

"The police?" The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Now, why? I have been attending him and know the state of his health. Nothing wrong?"

He looked from one to the other. Newley was on the point of answering when he was interrupted. Kathleen Bramley had entered the room unnoticed. Now she stepped forward, pointing a trembling hand at Mark.

"He—he did it!" she burst out. "It wasn't Francis! It couldn't have been——"

"Did what, my dear young lady?" Wilton glanced at her through his thick glasses. "Really, there is no suggestion——"

"I'm afraid there is, doctor," Newley said quietly. "You've not examined Mr. Henstone yet. Just look here. . . . Do you think death is natural?"

The dead man's glassy eyes were staring full at them. To Celia they seemed to be horribly big and open. Dr. Wilton bent down with an exclamation.

"You see?" Newley demanded. "The pupils——"

Wilton drew a deep breath. Without answering the manager, he stretched out his hand towards the blue bottle on the table, uncorked it, and smelt it dubiously. Then he nodded.

"I'm afraid," he said slowly, "there's some mistake. . . . Yes. . . . We must inform the Coroner at once."

"Then—then there'll be an inquest?" Mark asked, and his voice trembled a little. "There's something wrong?"

The doctor nodded. "There's something wrong," he said slowly. The cause of your uncle's death was not his illness. . . . It was belladonna . . . I'm afraid, Mark, there's no doubt he was poisoned."

CHAPTER III

NOT SO EASY

FROM the beginning it had been with mixed feelings that Superintendent Cary had viewed the death of James Henstone. A possible murder trial was sufficiently rare in the County to offer a certain thrill; but on the other hand, he could see himself faced with the unpleasant possibility of having to charge with murder a young man who, he believed, was incapable of any such thing. By the time he received the intimation that the expense of outside aid was to be incurred, he had carried the preliminary inquiries far enough to be worried for quite another reason, and it was with a certain relief that he welcomed the Scotland Yard detective in the room where Henstone had died.

Inspector McCleod was frankly puzzled. From the brief account of the case he had received, it seemed sheer absurdity that he should be there at all; and his thoughts found expression almost at once.

"If I may say so," he said, "I don't quite understand what I'm doing here. . . . Isn't there a clear case against Mark?"

Superintendent Cary smiled. It was what he had thought himself some twenty-four hours previously.

"The case being——?" he inquired blandly.

"Well—they were on bad terms. That very morning

James seems to have said enough to provoke most people, and finally tells his nephew that he's going to disinherit him, Mark has the opportunity when he pours out the medicine. He knows about the linament. There's an obvious temptation. He probably knows the doctor too, and the chances of getting a certificate. . . . There's at least a *prima facie* case. Probably it can be confirmed in certain points——"

"It can . . . Mark's evidence admits most of that, of course. He's been remarkably frank. . . . In any case, we can prove the doctor had warned him about the linament; that his fingerprints were on the glass and the two bottles; that James had told him about the will. And yet——"

"What's wrong with it, then?"

Cary sighed. "Nothing," he said. "It's as good a case as it ever was, if not better. But it's like the ghost story in Kipling—a beauty if only one had stopped investigating soon enough. It was the confirmatory evidence that dished us."

McCleod raised his eyebrows and looked a question.

"Here," Cary selected a number of photographs and held them out to him, with two or three sheets containing the inked impressions of fingerprints, "you'd better look at these."

"There seem to be a good many of them?"

"That's it," Cary said grimly. "There are. . . . Of course we tested the bottles and so on. Of course we found Mark's fingerprints on them. Only we found a good deal more—as you can see."

McCleod had been examining the photograph, stopping from time to time to compare it with the impressions.

"Carlton's," he said after a pause.

"Yes. He's snag Number One. . . . You see, he was in the room between the time the medicine was poured out and the time Henstone took it. He knew about the linament. After Henstone had told him he was sacked he poured water into the medicine. He admits that. Only"—he paused

significantly—"only, he doesn't admit touching the linament bottle—and his prints prove he did."

McCleod frowned. "He denied it?"

"Very heatedly. . . . That's not all. Of course, at first we didn't think much about Carlton, because he so obviously loses if the will isn't signed. I thought there was something queer when he was speaking—but it was the Bramley girl who gave the show away. He went to see her after his visit here, and she let slip two things about the conversation. The first, that Carlton thought that the will *had* been signed; the second, that there was some mention of the medicine in their conversation."

"Ah," McCleod said thoughtfully. "Then——"

"It was that, I think, and not just to plead with Henstone before Newley came which brought her here. She wanted to see, before eleven o'clock, that the medicine was all right—and stop Henstone from taking it, if it wasn't. Only she was refused admission."

"That's rather conjectural, isn't it? Though it might be worth questioning her a little more fully about it."

"Which, at the moment, we can't do. . . . My interview with her ended in her having hysterics. Now she's temporarily unfit to see anyone. Got a doctor's certificate and so on. So she's got plenty of time to think up a good lie."

"So the position is this," McCleod said. "You've a good case against Mark. But you've an even better one against Carlton?"

"Yes. And whoever we charge, the defence is going to say: 'Oh, but the evidence is purely circumstantial. Why there's just as good a case against so-and-so' . . . In fact, to prove one of them guilty we've almost got to prove the other innocent."

"Which might be hard."

"It will. . . . And that's not all. Look at that photo."

McCleod obeyed. "It looks a mess," he said.

"It is. That's the poison bottle. Now, we expect to find

Mark's, and they're there. Carlton's ought not to be there, but they are. The doctor took charge of it when he arrived, and so far as we can tell no one touched it. Those are his prints there. . . . The point is, whose are these?"

He pointed to a large, rough-looking line pattern, marked by a diagonal scar, apparently a thumb print, and to a fingerprint on the other side.

"Theoretically—you see the thumb overlaps Carlton's a little—the only two people who could have made them are Newley and Henstone himself. They're not a bit like either. Obviously they're a man's. But they're not Bembridge's, or Higson's."

"In fact, some time between Carlton's departure and the discovery of the body a completely unknown man somehow touched the bottle."

"Yes. That's not all, though. . . . Look at the glass. Those are Mark's—you can just make out a bit; those are Henstone's; those Miss Vernon's; those are Higson's. And that's all there ought to be. . . . Then, whose are those?"

"A woman's."

"Yes. But no woman ought to have been there. And she came some time *before* Miss Vernon." He paused.

"Now, how about charging Mark or Carlton?"

"Of course, it's impossible. . . . You've no idea—— Have you tried Miss Bramley?"

"That's just what we haven't. She threw her little fit before I could get on to that. . . . Well, after that, I got down to it pretty thoroughly, treating it as a completely open case, and just trying to find anyone who could have done it. First, of course, there's Newley. He doesn't seem to have a motive. There might be one connected with the business, and I'm having that gone into thoroughly. He doesn't seem to have touched anything—but any real murderer knows about prints these days. Henstone was asleep, so he could have done it. But there's no earthly case against him."

"Unless you get a motive. I see that."

"Higson. No motive; no prints. But he could have done it. His evidence pretty well makes certain that no one other than the ones mentioned came along the passage. It doesn't prove he didn't slip along either after Carlton or after Newley——

"Just a minute. . . . If his evidence proves that, how did the two unknowns get in—the man and the woman?"

Cary jerked a thumb towards the french window. "We thought at first it was a closed shop business," he said. "That looks as though it's locked, doesn't it? Only the bolts weren't engaged. So you can just push the two doors open, in spite of the lock. . . . And anyone could have got in."

"Hardly. Unless Henstone was expecting them or knew them. He'd have given the alarm? Or when he was asleep."

"Yes. There's another point of course. This method of committing the crime really assumes a knowledge of household routine. So we can more or less confine our attention to people who knew it. . . . Apart from those we've had, that would mean the staff. They're all accounted for. The only other two we've found so far are Bembridge and the doctor. . . . There's nothing against Bembridge at all. And the only point one can quarrel with so far as the doctor is concerned is that he seemed a little too ready to give a certificate."

"That's in Newley's favour. If he'd done it, why insist it was a murder?"

"And Miss Bramley's. She accused Mark too. . . . Well, there it is, and a very nice little mess."

"Miss Vernon," McCleod said thoughtfully. "You've not mentioned her."

"Didn't I? Well, there's not much to say. It's hard to see how she could have had a motive, having only been there a few days——"

"Unless she had one when she came?"

"She was engaged through an agency in quite a normal

way. And there's nothing queer about her, except that she said the door was locked one minute, and the next it wasn't."

"Which was probably one of the mysterious visitors?"

"Yes. . . . Oh, there's one other thing. She did seem to gloss over the mention of Mark in Henstone's dying words. Made out that he was calling for his nephew, when in fact the actual words suggest an accusation."

"Of course. They're a distinct point against Mark. That is, they show that Henstone believed it was he. . . . They raise a few problems too. Where's this place—Broughton House?"

"We've not found it yet. Of course, the spelling is conjectural. . . . It might be Browton, or anything."

"And 'old will' . . . I thought that Henstone had never made one."

"It certainly seems as though he hadn't. What he said to Bembridge was: 'This is the first time I've ever put pen to paper on a thing of this kind. I hope there's nothing in the popular idea it means approaching death.'"

McCleod nodded his head slowly and reflected.

"I suppose," he said after quite a long pause, "you're sure that 'will' hasn't a capital letter?"

"Good lord!" Cary's jaw dropped. "You mean it might be a man's name?"

"Obviously. And perhaps the first unknown. It's worth looking into—among other things. The puzzle is, where to start."

"I thought," Cary suggested, "that the county police might start by trying to find this Broughton House place. Also we might interrogate people in the neighbourhood to see if we can trace either of the two strangers. . . . I expect our lads could do that better than you."

"I should be glad if you would. . . . As for me, I'd like to have a few words with all the main people a bit later. But first of all, I'd better wade through this."

He indicated a little ruefully the sheaf of reports and photographs.

"I'll leave you to it then," Cary said, rising. "Ask the sergeant if you want me. . . . Good hunting."

With the departure of the Superintendent, McCleod settled down to a task which the extreme conscientiousness of the local police had made a somewhat lengthy one. There were photographs of the body, the tray, the fingerprints, and various aspects of the room; there were interviews with everyone in the vicinity—a good many of them merely examples of misplaced zeal. McCleod worked with practised rapidity, making a note from time to time in the open book beside him. He was a long way from having finished when a discreet knock sounded on the door, and he was so immersed in his work that he looked up uncomprehendingly as the butler entered.

"Lunch is served——" Higson began and hesitated, perhaps uncertain as to a detective's position in the social hierarchy. "Lunch is served, sir," he repeated after a pause, "if you require it. Mr. Mark gave instructions——"

"What?" McCleod queried absently. "Oh. Lunch? . . . Good idea. You're John Higson, the butler?"

There was distinct reserve in the bow which gave assent.

"Just been reading your statement, Mr. Higson. . . . Very clear on most points. It must have been a bit of a shock to you, wasn't it?"

A well-trained servant is one of the least responsive of persons when it comes to an attempt at luring him into conversation. Higson showed no sign of rising to the bait.

"A terrible affair, sir," he agreed soberly.

"You've been here some time, haven't you?"

"Just over six years, sir."

"A good place, I imagine, or you wouldn't have stayed?"

Apparently the butler had reconciled himself to the inquisition, though his manner was still cautious as he replied.

"The wages are good, sir, and the quarters very comfortable."

McCleod smiled knowingly. "From the way you put it, I gather there have been disadvantages. No doubt Mr. Henstone could be a little difficult at times?"

Higson hesitated. "Well, sir, Mr. Henstone was an invalid," he admitted.

"But I understood Mr. Mark dealt with him almost entirely?"

"That is true, sir, so far as little comforts were concerned. But, of course, not in waiting on him, or managing the staff——"

"But you and Mr. Mark were practically the only two people in the house who had much personal contact with him?"

"Yes, sir. . . . Of course, he would see the housekeeper from time to time, and mention—mention anything that occurred to him. In fact, once a week, sir."

McCleod nodded. "I gather he kept quite a close eye on things," he suggested.

"Well, sir, he was interested in details." Higson paused. "More than I have been accustomed to, sir. But that was always his way, sir, with everyone—even with Mr. Mark or Mr. Newley. Not being able to deal with things himself, he required very exact accounts from everyone."

"Ah," McCleod said thoughtfully. "I wonder you stood it so long," he added rather bluntly.

"Well, sir—I liked Mr. Mark. And Mr. Henstone was an invalid——"

"Meaning just what?" McCleod asked. "That you could excuse him or that things might be better when he died?" The butler hesitated but McCleod did not press the point. "You've noticed no change in him recently?" he asked. "He's not been worried or depressed?"

"On the contrary, sir. For the past few days he had been in exceptionally good spirits."

McCleod thought. "I don't like to say it," he said untruthfully, "but I rather understand that his manner was at times inclined to make people quarrel with him?"

"Not Mr. Mark, sir." The reply came a little unexpectedly. "He and Mr. Newley, sir, were the two people with whom there was never any disagreement. . . . I am sure, sir, that Mr. Mark could not have been more dutiful if he had been Mr. Henstone's own son, sir——"

McCleod rose to his feet. "No doubt," he said. "Yes, I think lunch would be a good idea. . . . Just a moment. I'd better scribble a note for the sergeant."

Higson waited patiently, at least to all outward appearances. Glancing up unexpectedly in the middle of his writing, it seemed to the Inspector that there was a suggestion of disquiet behind his professional mask; but that, no doubt could be explained by his obvious loyalty to Mark.

"I shall probably have to ask your help quite often, I'm afraid," he said as he folded the sheet. "It's often most important in a case like this to know people's relationships with each other and I imagine you could tell me as much as most people."

The butler only inclined his head in assent, and led the way. Lunch, apparently, was served for the Scotland Yard man's especial benefit, though there was another place laid, and it was a lunch which, in view of his early departure from Town, McCleod would normally have dealt with faithfully. Instead, there was an unusually worried frown on his face as he consumed the food almost automatically, and it was still there when the Superintendent entered, obviously with the intention of joining him.

"Had a good morning?" he asked cheerfully.

"Been wading through your reports," McCleod answered. "I haven't seen anyone yet, except Higson. . . . There are one or two I'd like to, though. Miss Bramley, Mark, Carlton, of course——"

"Afraid Miss Bramley's off the list for the moment. . . . In bed with a nervous breakdown. . . . Oh, I had a doctor's certificate all right. I suppose it's just the effect I had on on her!"

"Ah," McCleod said thoughtfully. "A pity." He looked round. "What did you yourself make of Higson?" he asked in a low voice.

"Why, he's all right, surely?" Cary asked in surprise. "I thought his evidence was very clear."

"It was," McCleod admitted. "Perhaps it's nothing. . . . Only I've a persistent impression I've seen him somewhere before."

"Seen him before? Where?"

"That's the annoying thing. . . . I can't quite place it," McCleod said slowly. "But I've a sort of impression it was in the dock!"

CHAPTER IV

HIDE AND SEEK

So far as Mark Henstone was concerned, there had been nothing particularly alarming about his interview with the Inspector. He had steeled himself for it, almost expecting that it would end in the production of a warrant and his immediate removal to gaol. In fact, it had seemed almost perfunctory. Of course, as McCleod had pointed out, he had already made a statement to Cary which the Scotland Yard man had studied. McCleod's own questions seemed to be concerned with ridiculous points of detail about the position of objects in the room; and since these were obviously recorded in the official photograph of the room, he could make nothing of them. Perhaps they were merely

a kind of memory test; perhaps they concealed some deep trap which he had not detected. Somehow there was something a little alarming in the very blandness of his interviewer, and the avoidance of all the awkward points.

It was a long time that night before he could get to sleep. He found himself going over the interview in his mind again and again, and as he did so the wonder recurred to his mind why he had not already been arrested. Once, in the state between sleeping and waking, the horrible doubt crept into his mind that perhaps he had actually done the murder without knowing it. For, however calm he might have seemed, he himself knew that during certain moments of that interview he had been in a blind rage which hardly permitted him to control his actions.

Who was guilty? The question recurred maddeningly. In spite of the ill-feeling between them, he could not believe it was Carlton. That seemed to leave only Newley, and of all the people in the world, Newley was one of the few who would actually lose by his uncle's death. Who else could there be? For the twentieth time he had given it up and turned over in bed when he heard something that made him sit up suddenly.

What it was, he did not know. It was not quite dark in the room. A little moonlight from the dull semi-circle in the misty sky shone through the window, revealing at least the outlines of the furniture. Though he did not quite know why, he did not reach for the bedside switch. But he was almost sure that there was no one in the room. For two or three minutes he sat there listening, and there was not so much as the creak of old woodwork. Then, when he was on the point of lying down again, the sound came again, with an unexpectedness which made him jump.

"Tap!"

This time there was no doubt. It certainly came from the

window, exactly as though someone had thrown a small pebble against the pane. For a moment he hesitated. Presumably someone outside was trying to attract his attention; but there was something so queer in the midnight summons that he felt an uncomfortable chill down his spine.

“Tap!”

The repetition decided him. In a moment he had slipped out of bed and crossed the room. Flinging the casement open, he peered out into the half darkness. His room was on the first floor, and with the low ceilings of the old house the distance to the ground was not great. Below him, a light patch showed the lawn, and he could even distinguish the outlines of the flower-beds; but there was no sign of any visitor. He leaned out a little further for a better view. Then something flew past his head, falling with a muffled thud on the floor behind him.

He had ducked instinctively. For the moment, he had the wild idea that it was a bullet. But there had been no sound of a shot. Another pebble? The sound had not been sharp enough. With another vain scrutiny of the shadows outside, he gave the window up. Going down on his hands and knees, he started to grope for the missile, and over against the opposite wall he found it.

After all, it was a pebble; but not only that. There was paper wrapped round it, tied, apparently, with a piece of rag which came off as he pulled at it. A message, obviously. For a moment he hesitated; then made his way across to where his coat hung and found a box of matches. Bending low so as not to be visible through the window, and shielding the light as well as he could he struck one, and read the few lines the crumpled sheet contained.

“I am a friend who can tell you something to your advantage,” the scrawled print began. “I must talk to you. Meet me at once on the terrace. Light cigarette at window for ‘yes’. Your safety depends on it.”

The match went out, but he did not strike another. There had been only two or three words more, and he had a guess at what they were. For a moment he waited, hopelessly mystified by the whole affair; half suspecting some kind of trap, and half tempted to take any risk if only as a means of putting an end to his own doubts. Quite suddenly he made up his mind. He had to know what it meant. Stepping back towards the window so that he would be in complete view of anyone watching from below, he felt for his case, and went through the motions of lighting one as he had been instructed.

There was no answering signal. Apparently the sender of the message was unwilling to reveal his whereabouts to anyone who might be looking out, small though the chance might be. Or perhaps he was waiting for the agreement with his proposal to be translated into action. The best way of finding out was to go. Slipping on dressing-gown and shoes, Mark opened the door silently and stepped out into the passage.

There was no special need for caution. His bedroom, since his uncle's death was the only one occupied at this side of the house. The only difficulty might be the staircase. Higson, he knew by experience, was an abnormally light sleeper; there was a strong probability that the least accidental noise would wake him. Then he remembered a window at the far end of the passage. An outhouse roof below had made it perfectly practicable for him as a boy, and there was no reason why it should not serve him now. He retraced his steps towards it.

It was merely a question of lowering himself a few feet from the window-sill, and though the tiles were slippery with dew and creaked ominously under his weight he crawled along safely, and reached without mishap the point where a water-butt made a convenient step to the ground. He paused for a moment to listen. The night was utterly still; the house behind absolutely dark and undis-

turbed. His unorthodox exit had brought him to the back of the house. The sender of the message would, presumably, be in front. He started to make his way round to the terrace, expecting at any moment some dark figure to emerge from the shadows. But he reached the corner without a sign of anyone, and stood for a moment shivering in the cool air as he looked about him.

The patch of shadow cast by the house obscured the whole pathway along the foot of the wall. If anyone were waiting there, Mark decided, he would have to go along the terrace in order to see him. Abruptly the folly of his hasty action came to him. Discovery would certainly add to the suspicions the police already entertained. There was always the possibility that the message was intended merely as a decoy so that he could be attacked. But why should anyone want to attack him. He decided to settle things one way or another. Moving with the greatest caution, and ready for anything, he started forward.

More than half-way along, he came to a sudden halt. From the far end, in the other wing of the house, he had caught a single glimpse of a light. It was not bright, hardly more than a glow, and it vanished almost instantly. The thought crossed his mind that it might be a signal from the man whom he was to meet. Then he changed his mind. The light seemed to come from inside the house. Then the matter was put beyond all doubt. The light came again, this time shining steadily, and he caught his breath in a little gasp. The glow undeniably came from a window—the window of the room where his uncle had died.

He shivered a little as he stood there, and the shiver was not entirely due to his inadequate costume. There was something a little unnerving in the glow of light coming from the one place where it seemed completely impossible. He knew that the police had locked and sealed the door of that room. No one could be there. Then he saw something else. For a moment the light glinted on the white

hair of a man's head at the edge of the window, as though its owner were cautiously peering inside.

Suddenly the light vanished. From the house came a woman's scream. A dead silence lasted for half a minute; then turmoil seemed to break loose.

Running feet sounded on the flags, coming towards him. A darker patch moved in the shadow. He dived for it. As he did so, the toe of his loose slipper caught a projecting stone and he fell headlong, half stunning himself. Someone ran by him as he lay; then from the house came an indescribable din.

For a moment he could not place it at all. It was a brazen, persistent clamour, as though a whole tribe of cymbal-players had gone mad. Then he recognized it with a slight shock. It was a gong—no more than the gong which on ordinary occasions signalled dinner-time. But now it was beaten wildly, evidently as an alarm.

He jumped to his feet. Someone was running in the drive below. As he set off in pursuit, he was aware of the house lights blazing up one after another and of the front door opening. Someone came running behind him, but he did not trouble to look round. All at once he was conscious of a figure very near him. In that instant a pair of arms gripped him, and he and his assailant crashed together.

From the beginning he had no chance. His opponent had fallen uppermost, and Mark was winded. Besides, the other was as strong as he was, and had science. After an absurdly brief struggle he was lying on his back in the drive, with someone kneeling on his chest. He heard the man's heavy breathing. The gong's clamour had stopped, and the night seemed unnaturally still.

"Who—who's that?" he panted. "What——?"

A light flashed quite near him, swept the gravel for a moment, and finally focused upon him. He heard a voice from behind it.

"What's this? . . . Oh, you, Brooks. . . . What——?"

"Got one of 'em, sir!" his captor announced triumphantly. "I tackled him as he bolted——"

"Let's see." The second man stepped forward and the torch shone full on Mark's face. "Good Lord! It's Mr. Mark——"

A wave of anger swept over the young man, perhaps more at the helplessness of his position than anything else.

"Let me up, you fools!" he snapped. "It's an idiotic mistake! You've let them get away!"

The man with the torch hesitated. "Right, Brooks," he said, and the pressure on Mark's chest was removed. He scrambled to his feet, sore and shaken. "Not a sound of 'em," the man with the torch was saying, and now he recognized the voice as that of the detective-sergeant. "They've got away. . . . While we were messing about here. . . . What the devil was that noise inside?"

"I'm sorry, sir——" Brooks apologized.

"You couldn't help it." He turned to Mark, speaking in a voice which was respectful enough, but had a distinct note of command. "Would you please come up to the house, sir? Perhaps we can find out there what's happened."

Mark followed without any answer but a grunt. His right leg was distinctly painful, and he had the feeling that they had muddled things badly. A challenge rang out as they neared the door.

"Who's that?"

The sergeant's torch flashed. It revealed the pyjama-clad figure of Higson, still retaining a certain dignity, in spite of his costume and the poker in his hand. He stood blinking in the light, but with a defensive attitude a little to one side of the entrance.

"Police—— Oh. It's you, is it? You'd better come in. . . . They got away."

A crowd of excited servants in all stages of undress filled

the hall. Mark left the police and Higson to deal with them. He was feeling horribly puzzled and confused, and a cold certainty was growing in his mind that his part in the night's happenings would somehow be turned into evidence against him. He made up his mind to say nothing of the mysterious visitor and the note. He was trying to work out a plausible and consistent story omitting this vital fact when the sergeant at last returned, followed by Higson and Celia Vernon, both very white and shaken.

"Well, sir. Perhaps you could tell us what happened?"

"That's just what I can't," Mark rejoined. "I couldn't sleep. I got out to get a cigarette, and happened to look out of the window. I thought I saw a man prowling about in the garden, and I decided I'd better investigate. So I let myself drop from the passage window, and came round——"

"You didn't rouse the house, sir?" the sergeant prompted dubiously.

"No. Thought my best chance was to go quietly and nab him. . . . There wasn't a sign of him until I got to the front. Then I saw a light in my uncle's room—the room where he died."

"What, sir?"

This time he had certainly interested the sergeant. He did some quick thinking, and decided to cut out all mention of the white head at the window. In all probability, that was the man who had sent him the note.

"There's no doubt that's where it was," he affirmed. "I started along the terrace towards it, and it went out. Someone ran past me, and I made a grab, but tripped——"

"Just a minute, sir," the sergeant apologized. "He moved over to the door, and seemed to be holding a whispered conversation with someone just outside. There was the sound of retreating footsteps, and he re-entered the room. "And then, sir?" he asked as if there had been no interruption.

"I heard someone running in the drive, and I gave chase.

Then the noise started in the house. . . . I suppose your man got me? How on earth did you happen to be on the spot at the critical moment?"

"Just luck, sir," the sergeant evaded. In fact, he had spent the best part of the night in making certain that Mark, among others, should not obey any impulse to disappear. "You didn't see anyone, sir?"

"Not plainly," Mark said a little hesitantly. It was his first actual lie. "Not to see anything recognizable, I mean——"

"You'd some idea, though, sir?" The sergeant noticed his doubt.

"No, really. . . . None."

The sergeant looked at him for a moment; then turned to Higson.

"And you?" he asked.

"I was awakened by a noise downstairs. . . . I am a very light sleeper, as Mr. Mark knows, sir." Mark nodded. "I went down, and as I was on the stairs, saw a gleam of light along the passage——"

"From Mr. Henstone's room?" the sergeant demanded.

"I'm almost sure it was, though it was only for a minute. Well, I knew that room was locked, and anyone inside it must have forced an entrance—I'd previously spoken to Mr. Henstone, sir, about the window. I was wondering what to do, when I heard a slight noise behind me. Then the gong started. I ran out, hoping to catch whoever was in the room."

The door opened to admit Brooks, who simply shook his head in a hopeless way. The sergeant frowned and thought for a moment; then he turned to the secretary. "And you, miss?" he asked with a trace of resignation in his voice.

"I couldn't sleep either. She was the most self-possessed of the three, and the only one who looked passably presentable. In fact, it occurred to Mark for the first time

that she was actually quite pretty. "I got out of bed to open the window, and saw the light below——"

"From Mr. Henstone's window, miss?"

"I'm sure it was. . . . That's why I thought I'd better see if things were all right. I crept downstairs——"

"You didn't give the alarm, miss?" the sergeant asked dubiously.

"Well—it might not have been anything."

The sergeant sighed. "Yes, miss?"

"I saw the light in the passage, but I didn't know what to do. You see, it might have been the police. On the other hand, if the door was locked and I tried it, whoever was there might have got out. I thought I'd better get some help. I was going back, and someone moved right in front of me——"

"Mr. Higson, miss?"

"I suppose it was. . . . I thought it was the burglar. I daren't move. The only thing to do seemed to be to rouse the house. The gong was just near me——"

"Then it was you who sounded it, miss?"

"Just why, miss?" The sergeant sounded puzzled but patient. "I should have thought you'd have called out——?"

"I thought whoever was ahead would grab me before I could make anyone hear. The gong was an inspiration. I felt sure it would wake people."

For a moment words seemed to fail the sergeant. He looked from one to the other.

"Well, miss," he said heavily. "It did."

CHAPTER V

LETTER FROM A FRIEND

CALLED out of his bed in the small hours, McCleod had already put in a good morning's work by breakfast-time, and he was just on the point of finishing that meal when Cary entered. The Superintendent had been up as long as the Inspector himself, and as he poured himself out a cup of coffee was plainly not in the best of tempers.

"Any luck?" McCleod asked, feeling for his pipe.

"Nothing. . . . And I've just had a sweet little interview with the Chief. Must be suffering from liver or something. Can't understand how it could happen while we were actually investigating the case—inefficiency in the police force—doesn't think that Superintendents ought to sleep. . . . Oh, and old Bembridge got on the phone. . . . Didn't like the way we were watching his client Mark or something. I pointed out that what had happened proved that there was need to watch, and he said it didn't seem to have made much difference."

"Perhaps it didn't," McCleod admitted ruefully. "It's a pity, certainly, that the man watching was at the other side of the house. . . . Then you've not located any strangers?"

"No one we can lay hands on. . . . A white-haired old boy who looked like a tramp was about here yesterday, but he seems to have vanished into thin air. I can't find that he lodged anywhere. . . . Any luck here?"

"Not much. . . . First of all, unless I'm mistaken, there were two burglars, not one."

"What?"

"Seems fairly certain. Number One was a hob-nailed chap, who seems to have executed a kind of step dance under Mark's bedroom window, then walked along the

terrace to have a look at Number Two. His little footsteps are pretty plain. . . . Number Two was more professional. He wore rubbers, and seems to have known all about how to work the french window. Though what he did inside the room I can't say. He didn't leave any prints."

"They came together," Cary suggested. "Hob-nails did sentry-go outside, while Rubbers did the burgling."

"They came separately, and from different directions," the Inspector corrected him. "There are enough tracks to show that. And I've an idea that Rubbers wouldn't have been a bit pleased if he'd known that anyone was peeping in on him. . . . Now, what Rubbers wanted is fairly obvious. He must have intended either to have taken something away from that room or to have put something there——"

"To have put something there?"

"He might have wanted to plant a bit of evidence. If he did, I can't find anything. Nor does anything seem to be missing. Of course, I couldn't look in the safe or the desk."

"Presumably he couldn't, either," Cary suggested. "So far as the safe's concerned, only Henstone had the combination. We've sent for a man to open it. So far as concerns the desk, it's got a pretty good lock—because I thought of opening it myself. . . . It's not been forced?"

"No signs of it. . . . You said you'd bring the keys?"

Cary felt in his pocket, and threw the bunch on the table. "We'd better look into that next," he suggested. "It's a pity we couldn't do it before."

"Of course. We can't be sure that something's not missing—or been put in. . . . Though I went over the locks with a magnifying-glass, and I'm pretty sure he hadn't time to do it."

"Anything else?"

McClcod felt in his pocket, and placed on the breakfast table four small pebbles and a piece of rag. Cary eyed them without enthusiasm.

"What's that?" he asked. "Where did you get them?"

"Two on the terrace—otherwise stoneless. One on the window of Mark's room—on the sill outside, that is. One in Mark's room, with the rag."

"Mark?" Cary frowned at them. "What are they for, anyhow?"

"I think they mean that, last night at least, Mark departed from the strict path of truth. If he didn't sleep, it was because someone chucked pebbles at his window. If he went out, it was because someone threw a message in, tied with the rag, asking him to go out. I'd like a word with him, later." He thought for a moment. "Oh, the butler is notoriously a very light sleeper. I don't know about Miss Vernon. Perhaps that is the idiotic way in which she would behave. Nothing else, I think."

Cary gulped down a last cup of coffee. In contrast to McCleod, he had made a poor breakfast. He took out a pipe, eyed it distastefully before replacing it, and finally lit a cigarette.

"And generally if there's one time I enjoy a pipe, it's after breakfast," he said mournfully. "Suppose we have a look at the desk?"

McCleod led the way. The night's adventures had apparently made no impression upon Higson, who greeted them as they passed through the hall.

"That chap's a bit too much always on the spot," Cary growled as soon as they were out of earshot. "You can't move a step in the damn place without his seeing you. . . . Get any news about him?"

"Oh. I meant to have told you. Yes. Did six months when I was a bobby in London. I got him them. . . . Now, I've an idea he recognized me when I first saw him. But I'm pretty sure he doesn't know that I've spotted him."

"What for?"

"Larceny. . . . Of course, there's nothing we can charge

him with. He served his time, and if he made good afterwards, good luck to him. . . . Only, if Henstone found out anything, it might have been a motive. . . . You've got the key?"

Cary unlocked the door and they entered. So far as one could tell, the room was exactly as they had left it the previous day, except that a box had been placed on the strip of lino under the french window. McCleod lifted it, to reveal an indistinct muddy patch.

"That's Rubbers's only trade-mark," he said. "Crêpe sole. Fairly normal size. Pretty hard to identify. . . . No other trace at all."

Cary stood looking round. For a moment his eyes settled gloomily on the safe; then they switched to the desk which formed the immediate objective.

"Handy bit of work, isn't it?" said McCleod. "You see, it will swivel right out, so that he could get at it without moving. He got things very nicely fixed for himself on the whole. I won't say he didn't like to bother anyone—but he didn't like to rely on anyone by all accounts."

"And he certainly didn't trust anyone. . . . Well, let's have a look."

He produced the keys, and unlocked in turn the two rows of drawers.

"You take the right side, and I'll take the left," McCleod suggested. "Of course, we can't go through this lot properly now. If we can just get a rough idea, and sort out anything that looks at all possible——"

It was an illuminating collection which showed the dead man in anything but a favourable light. All the documents in it were purely personal—letters from relations, copies of letters to relations, a few, very few, from friends, and a good deal of information which could only be classed as libellous about the people concerned. It had apparently been the habit of Henstone to collect dossiers about the various people with whom he had to deal, in which were recorded in

particular all the facts, or pieces of gossip, which could conceivably react to their discredit. Cary looked up with a disgusted face.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" he asked. "Keeping all this stuff——"

"Yes . . . I mean, I have seen stuff like it," McCleod answered. "In a blackmailer's little library."

"You don't mean that Henstone——?"

"We've no evidence that he did. . . . No, I think all this is quite in keeping with his character. Not having many good impulses himself, he liked to know the worst about other people. . . . We'll put them aside. Might come in useful——"

"Here's something," Cary said after a minute. He held out a book labelled "Diary". "Now, if he really kept that up to date——"

He broke off, looking in disappointment at the unintelligible mass of symbols the page revealed.

"Greek letters," McCleod said. "But not Greek. . . . Not English, written in Greek, either. . . . Must be a code. We'll get that dealt with by the experts. . . . I'm nearly through this side—and not a bite. Of course, this stuff may show—— What's that?"

Cary was examining a single sheet of cheap paper which seemed to have excited his interest.

"Remember what you said—about 'old will'?" he asked. "Well, it may be a coincidence, but if so, it's a pretty steep one. Here is a Will—I mean, a chap called Will—and he knows about Broughton House!"

He passed the sheet over. It was written in an illiterate, unscholarly hand, and contained only a few lines scrawled in pencil. McCleod took it and read.

"Dear Jim," it ran. "Just heard that you're still in the land of the living and have struck it lucky. . . . I wonder if you remember the old days, and the lark at Broughton House? I may be your way soon and will look you up."

I've no address just now but the next Union. Yours. Will Little."

For a minute or two he sat studying it carefully and said nothing. Then he carefully laid the sheet aside.

"That rather alters things," he said slowly.

"Looks like it," the Superintendent assented. "First of all, probably he wasn't speaking about a will at all but about this chap as 'old Will'. . . . Then the fellow says he's paying a visit——"

"And perhaps he did," McCleod supplied. "Either last night, or on the day Henstone died."

"Unknown Number One? It's quite possible. . . . Though it's odd he should have come in like that by way of the window, isn't it?"

"Maybe." McCleod frowned thoughtfully. "It looks, too, as if whatever the lark was at Broughton House, it was somehow important. If not, would he have remembered it when he was dying? . . . It seems to me that perhaps we're concentrating a little too much on the present. I mean, here's one piece of Henstone's past which has just recently come up. I should like to know more about that."

"Newley's the man for that. I believe he's known Henstone nearly all his life, and he's the one person who hasn't quarrelled with him. . . . Otherwise, he seems to have kept it fairly dark. What happened so far as I can gather is that he and Mark's father were both in love with the same girl. She married Mark's father, and Henstone never forgave her. . . . He went to the dogs properly for a bit, tried all kinds of jobs—sailor, journalist, painter, lorry driver, and goodness knows what. Then he inherited this cash and the business——"

"From whom?"

"That's the funny part of it. So far as I know, it wasn't a relative at all, but one of the stray people whom he'd met while he was buzzing about, and had done some kind of a good turn to. Well, by that time his family had gone just

in the opposite direction and were in pretty low water. Mark's father had died. He didn't help them a scrap, until Mark's mother died a couple of years later. Then he adopted Mark. . . . And just after that, this illness got him. He's been like it ever since."

"It certainly needs looking into," McCleod said. "We must see Newley as soon as we can. . . . Well. That seems to be all."

"Barring the safe," Cary said. "And I gather that what's in there is mainly business stuff. And now——?"

"Now I think that we'd certainly better see Mark. He may have thought better of his untruthfulness. And I think it might be worth while trying this chap Little's name on him—just to see if he reacts. Come along."

From the omniscient Higson they learnt that Mark was in the library, and in all probability disengaged and it was thither they went to look for him. He was sitting in one of the big armchairs beside the fire, obviously failing to read the book which he held in his hand, and as they entered he rose with a certain appearance of disquiet.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Henstone," McCleod said briskly. "But there are one or two things in which you might help us. For example, about last night——"

"I told the sergeant about that——" Mark answered defensively. "Really, there's very little I can say. . . . I never went anywhere near the end of the terrace where my uncle's room is; and, of course, it was quite dark. I couldn't see anything distinctly——"

"But you did see someone, sir," McCleod rejoined suavely. "That was what first took you downstairs, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Mark said quickly. "Of course."

"And you were awake already. . . . Had you just woken up, or had you been lying awake for some time?"

"I'd not really been to sleep at all," Mark said slowly. "Things were rather on my mind——"

"Naturally. . . . So you'd have heard anything, I suppose, if there'd been any noise?"

"I don't think I should have heard any slight noise at the other end of the terrace," Mark said uncertainly. "And, as I understand it, there needn't have been much."

"Probably not, sir. . . . So you don't think it was any noise made by our visitor that awakened you?"

"No. I was simply lying awake——"

"Exactly. . . . And then you got up for a cigarette, and you saw this man. Could you describe him at all?"

Mark drew a deep breath, and frowned in what he hoped looked like an effort at concentration. Actually he was wondering what he ought to do.

"No," he said at last. "I don't think I could——"

"It was moonlight, sir, wasn't it. . . . Could you see, for example, whether he was tall or short? The light needn't have been very good for that."

"I think—I rather had the impression—that he was tall," Mark said after a pause.

"Old or young? . . . Fat, or thin, sir?"

"Quite young, I should say," Mark said dubiously. "Not particularly fat——"

"Nothing else you could tell us about him?"

"No."

"There's another matter, sir." McCleod produced the letter. His eyes were on Mark's face as he held the sheet so that its general form could be seen, though it could not be read. "We've just come across a letter which your uncle seems to have received recently. Have you ever heard him speak of a man called Little—William Little?"

This time Mark's manner had changed completely. He was like a man who suddenly finds himself out of deep water and on safe ground.

"No," he said, and this time neither of his hearers doubted that he was speaking the truth. "I have never heard my uncle mention the name. But then, he was not very likely

to do so. He told me very little of his private affairs. I should say that Mr. Newley would have his confidence, if anyone."

"You've not heard the name. . . . And the name your uncle mentioned when he was dying. Broughton House. Does that convey anything to you at all?"

"Absolutely nothing," Mark said with conviction. "I'm quite sure that I've never heard of either of them before."

"That's a pity, sir." McCleod's voice was regretful. "We had some idea that perhaps it was something in your uncle's past that was responsible for his death. . . . We thought that perhaps the burglar last night might have been someone who has known him then. . . . By the way, the man ran past you when you slipped. Perhaps you could tell me what sort of boots he was wearing? I mean, did he make a noise, or not?"

"I think——" Mark began, and stopped. The troubled look had returned to his face, and he was obviously ill at ease. "It was just a sort of thudding," he said slowly. "As if he had rubber soles——"

"I see, sir," McCleod said blandly. His hand went to his pocket, and Cary caught a glimpse of the pebbles, as it emerged. "Now, sir, I wonder if——"

But Mark was to be reprieved. There was a knock at the door and Higson entered, bearing a note on a tray—a rather grubby-looking epistle, Cary thought. Mark accepted it, tore the flap, and read. They saw his face whiten a little. He seemed to be reading it again. Then, with a sudden movement, and before anyone could have stopped him, he had crumpled it convulsively in his hand and flung it into the heart of the blazing fire.

Cary made a movement as if he would like to dive for it; but McCleod gripped his arm. In any case, it would have been useless. The paper had fallen down between the logs, and in a moment vanished in a puff of flame.

Higson had stood waiting, tray in hand. Mark turned to him sharply. "Who brought that?" he demanded.

"It was simply pushed through the letter-box, sir," the butler answered. "The man had already gone when I opened the door, sir."

"All right," Mark said and, as the butler vanished, stood frowning, as if he had momentarily forgotten all about Cary and McCleod. The Inspector recalled his mind to their presence.

"Not bad news, I hope, sir?" he said.

"No!" Mark snapped.

McCleod studied him for a moment. "About this man Little," he said, and Cary saw the hand containing the pebbles slip back into his pocket. "You're quite sure, sir—"

"I know nothing of him!" Mark burst out irritably. "I've told you all I can. Can't you leave me alone?"

"Certainly, sir," McCleod assented, almost apologetically. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. . . . If anything should occur to you, perhaps you'll let us know."

He almost hustled Cary out of the room. The Superintendent's instincts were all in favour of pressing a witness who was so obviously on an awkward spot.

"Quick!" McCleod urged in a low voice as the door closed behind them. "He's several minutes start, but we might get him. . . . If we go across the park——"

"Who?" Cary demanded.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken," McCleod said as they hurried up the passage, "it was a gentleman we're very anxious to meet—Mr. William Little. . . . Our friend Mark is a bad liar, but he's putting in a good deal of practice just now. . . . This way. Hurry!"

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERIOUS MEETING

CELIA VERNON found it hard to settle down to work that morning. Her interview with McCleod in connexion with the night's activities had passed off mildly enough, but it had been sufficient to unsettle her mind. She was correcting rather viciously an unwonted number of typing errors in her last letter when she heard the door open and looked up.

Mark Henstone was standing in the doorway looking as though he did not quite know what to do next. Indeed, she had a momentary impression that he had expected to find the room empty, and was a little taken aback by her presence. She rose to her feet as he hesitantly advanced a pace or two towards the desk.

"You wanted me, Mr. Henstone?" she asked. "Can I do anything?"

Mark visibly hesitated. Something in his manner strengthened her conviction that he did not really want her at all; in fact that he wished she was somewhere else. He was obviously searching for an excuse.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Miss Vernon," he said at last. "I'm sure you must be very busy . . . I only wanted—yes, I wanted two or three large envelopes—foolscap size . . . Do you happen to have any here?"

His eyes had been searching the desk hopefully, and a packet of such envelopes lay in full view. He was a poor dissimulator, she thought; and waited with a certain interest to see what he would say next.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Henstone," she assented. "I have plenty here. . . . How many? Half a dozen?"

"Thank you." He took them absently, holding them as if he did not quite know what to do with them. He eyed

the piles of papers and the open files on the desk. "You're very busy," he repeated obviously.

Clearly it was an attempt to open a conversation, though his manner was scarcely encouraging. She decided to respond.

"Yes . . . Mr. Bembridge said it would be as well to get all the papers in order as far as possible. . . . I believe he has your authority——"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course." Mark said vaguely. "I am afraid that you will find things a little muddled. It will be all the more difficult since you have been here so short a time——"

"Oh, no. It's really not bad." She smiled. "It's only a matter of tidying up a bit."

She was beginning to wonder when, if ever, he was coming to the point of his visit and of the conversation. It was certainly not an attempt at mild flirtation. She could not imagine Mark flirting with anyone. The slightly puzzled, remote way in which he was looking at her suggested rather that she was an obstacle which he was trying to surmount as gracefully as possible. His next words made her doubtful if he was coming to the point at all.

"Yes. I see." He assented, and hesitated again. "Well—thank you, Miss Vernon."

He turned as if to go out. Celia's eyebrows rose quizzically as she looked at the back of his head. Somehow she had frightened him off though she had done her best to be helpful. But in the doorway he turned, and with a great assumption of casualness came back.

"Oh . . . By the way, Miss Vernon . . . I suppose you haven't happened to come across a letter to my uncle from a man called Little? William or Will Little? I understand that it was received a day or two ago——"

Evidently that was the real reason for his visit, and she suspected that his original plan had been to look for it in her absence. She shook her head.

"Not so far, Mr. Henstone. . . . Could you give me any idea of its subject? Would it be a personal or a business letter?"

"Oh—personal." He hesitated again. "A mere note—just a few lines. From an old acquaintance."

"Then I don't think it would be here. If Mr. Henstone kept it at all, it would be in his desk—the swivel desk—in his room——"

"I see." Mark frowned. That room, of course, was at present locked by the police. "Of course, possibly it was not kept. There is no special reason why it should have been——"

It flashed across her mind that he was interested rather in the destruction of the letter than in finding it.

"I'll let you have it immediately if it turns up," Celia assured him. "Perhaps the police have found it. Have you asked them?"

She had made the suggestion innocently enough; but as soon as the words had left her lips she realized that that was exactly what Mark wanted to avoid. There was evidently some mystery about the letter from Little—something the police might discover—and it rather looked as if Mark had tried to anticipate them.

"No doubt," he said after a pause. "Though, of course, it is not in the least important. . . . Thank you, Miss Vernon."

This time his departure was final. Celia felt a mixture of amusement and sympathy; but above all she was curious. What was the importance of the letter? Had it any connexion with what had happened the night before? Who was the man, William—or Will—Little? Something in the last question seemed to rouse a vague, elusive memory, but she could not quite place it. She reseated herself at the desk and tried to resume work; but it was hopeless. She was staring out of the window vacantly as she tried to work out some plausible explanation of it all when she caught a

glimpse of a figure which was just crossing the lawn. It was Mark Henstone, who should, surely, have been addressing his foolscap envelopes in the library. Evidently he had come round the side of the house. She strongly suspected that he had come out of the library window. He seemed to be making, by an inconspicuous route, for the drive gate. Something purposeful in his stride contradicted any idea that he was simply going for a stroll, and once or twice he glanced back a little furtively towards the house, as though he was afraid of being followed.

Suddenly she was tempted to do just that. It was only a few minutes to the time when she would normally have ceased her work, and in any case no one was likely to trouble about that. Without troubling to collect the scattered papers on the desk, she closed and locked the door behind her and made her way outside.

It was only when she was actually committed and hurrying down the drive that it occurred to her just how monstrous her proceedings were. In a sense, Mark Henstone was probably her employer—if she had one—and it was certainly not her business to spy upon him. She tried to reassure herself with the thought that she had no intention of doing him any harm; that she really meant to help him. In any case, by that time, Mark had probably got a considerable start, and she would not find him at all. And then the sight of her quarry just ahead somehow abolished her scruples.

Mark was standing up the hill a little way, probably in the erroneous belief that he was hidden by the hedge. Only chance saved her as she emerged from the gates. Just at that moment he was looking in the opposite direction. She drew back hastily. Evidently he was waiting to see if anyone was following him. Through the leaves of a nearby bush she watched him, while he watched the gate.

At last, apparently, he was satisfied that his rear was safe. All at once he turned, and walked briskly up the road.

With only a momentary qualm of conscience she started after him, ready to flatten herself into the hedge at any moment if he should look round.

She had no cause to worry. He was in a hurry now. Once he glanced at his wrist watch. Evidently he had an appointment to keep. It was all she could do to keep up with him and she found herself getting breathless. A drizzle of rain began to fall, and she had no hat or coat. She was almost inclined to give it up when at last Mark stopped.

He almost caught her unawares. She had just time to reach cover as he glanced round. Then, apparently satisfied, he turned sharply along a narrow lane to the right, and giving him a minute's start she followed, quickening her pace a little to regain the lost distance. She was getting horribly wet. Drippings from her hair slipped clammy down her back, and her shoes squelched unpleasantly at every step in the thick mud. Luckily they had not much farther to go. A bend in the lane showed that Mark had come to a halt standing beside a gateway leading into the fields on the left.

He was not alone. Facing him, and leaning against the gate in an attitude which had somehow a suggestion of insolence, was an elderly man dressed like a labourer. His face was turned away from her. All she could see was a fringe of long, and not particularly clean, white hair which projected below the cap. And they were obviously engaged in some extremely interesting conversation.

The old man seemed to be urging something rather in a "take it or leave it" manner. Mark was refusing, and yet he was evidently worried. From where she stood she could hear nothing, and it was impossible to approach nearer along the lane itself. A gap in the hedge suggested another possibility. Squeezing herself through, she started cautiously up the hedge-side, only too keenly aware that it was only necessary for one of them to lean over the gate to discover

her, and that, once discovered, excuses under the circumstances would be impossible.

But they were too engrossed to bother about her. At first she could hear the murmur of voices; then she caught a word or two. And the very first words she distinguished were enough to steel her for the risks involved in the last few necessary yards; for in Mark's voice came the name which had formed a part of James Henstone's dying words.

"—at Broughton House——"

Lying flat behind a bush which represented the nearest approach which she dare make, she set herself to listen. The white-haired man was speaking now, in a jeering, unpleasant tone.

"—better take my terms. Don't you go thinking you'll find it for yourself. You won't—not if you looked a hundred years. You'll have to come there with me—and pay what I want."

"I've already told you I can't," Mark said with an obvious effort. "I'll think it over——"

"You'll come to-night, or not at all. And you can pay me something on account like. . . . There's others, if you won't—but it's more in your interest, either to make it public, or destroy it."

"I don't know that it is. And you can't, or won't, tell me what it's about. . . . I may not have anything to pay you with——"

The old man laughed. "That's just a tale. . . . If it's left to you, of course you'll have it. If it isn't—well, who's to know unless one of us tell them?"

"I've already told you that I shan't touch a penny that isn't legally mine," Mark rejoined angrily. "I warn you if——"

"All right. . . . You just think it over. . . . But you'll come. I'll see you to-night. The nine train. You'd better manage it, or——"

He left the threat unfinished. There was the scratching

of a match, then a whiff of particularly villainous tobacco, and the grating of nailed boots on the stones.

"Well, good morning, Mr. Henstone," the old man's voice came sarcastically. "And you think it over careful. You'd best."

Mark did not reply. She heard heavy footsteps receding down the lane, but for a minute or two Mark made no attempt to move. She lay there shivering with the cold of her wet clothes, but with her mind busy on what she had just heard. The subject of the conversation was fairly plain. Apparently the old man—was it Will Little?—had offered to reveal to Mark the hiding place of the "old will" which Henstone had mentioned in the words which he had managed to gasp out before he died. Obviously he had made an offer and expected to be paid for it. Equally obviously, Mark was tempted, even if he had not made up his mind. And if he accepted, he had not long to reflect on it. It was "the nine train to-night" or nothing. In other words, Little proposed to communicate either with the police or with someone else who would benefit under its provisions.

At last Mark was moving. She heard his footsteps approach and pass as he made his way back along the lane. There was no point now in following him very closely. Almost certainly he would be going back to the house; and the one vital thing was to avoid discovery. Now that the excitement of the pursuit had passed, she was beginning to feel a little ashamed of herself. The one thing she most desired was to get back unobserved and change her clothes without being seen by anyone.

Mark must have got sufficient start by now. She rose to her feet, not without a glance of horror at the effect the mud had produced upon her skirt, and climbing the gate into the lane set off on the way back, keeping an eye on the road ahead in case Mark should have stopped for any reason, but otherwise not worrying very much. A glimpse

of his figure well ahead on the way to the house had completely reassured her as she was turning into the main road when a voice behind made her jump round with a start.

"Good morning, Miss Vernon."

She had been too intent upon Mark to consider the possibility of anyone coming from the other direction. As she turned, she found herself face to face with Cary and McCleod. Both were hatless and coatless; both were wet; and the Superintendent at least extremely sulky.

"Oh—good morning, Inspector!" It was really quite a creditable attempt at speaking naturally, though she was unpleasantly conscious of the quick beating of her heart, and still more of the spectacle she must present. She saw a trace of a smile on McCleod's lips as he looked, and would have liked to smack him. "But it isn't a good morning, is it? The rain caught me——"

"I noticed that," McCleod said gravely. "It caught us. I wonder you came out on a day like this without a coat."

"Why, Mr. McCleod, you did yourself," Celia countered innocently. "I just wanted a breath of air—after the office and the papers. Being cooped up there gets on one's nerves."

"Of course," McCleod agreed politely. "But I'm afraid you're wet through."

"It was fine when I started. And you're nearly as bad as I am. I suppose you're out on business?"

"Naturally," McCleod agreed calmly. "But you just came out—for pleasure?"

His eyes were on her muddied skirt as he spoke, and she had to summon all her self-control to answer in an ordinary voice.

"Oh yes."

"Alone?"

This time it was the Superintendent who put the question, and his voice was distinctly gruff. She wondered if

they had seen Mark, and in spite of herself found the colour rising to her cheeks.

"Of course. I hardly know anyone here yet. I've only been here a day or two."

"Some people make friends quickly," McCleod observed with the air of one who makes a general observation. "I just wondered if you'd happened to see or meet Mr. Henstone. We'd an idea he came this way——"

"No—I'm sorry," after all, it was the literal truth. She had gone to all the trouble of lying in a ditch not to meet him. "You wanted him?"

"It's not important," McCleod said, but his eyes were on her, and she felt that her cheeks were burning. "Perhaps you're going back?"

She fell into step beside them, but conversation distinctly flagged. McCleod offered a few observations on the beautiful colours presented by the English countryside in autumn; Cary said nothing whatever. By the time they reached the drive complete silence had fallen.

The ubiquitous Higson met the dripping trio in the hall; and the faintest possible trace of surprise showed on his face. Celia felt called upon to offer an explanation.

"Got caught in the rain, Higson—out for a walk. And no umbrella. I'll have to go and change at once if I'm not to get my death of cold."

Almost immediately she felt her mistake. Over-readiness to explain might produce just the result she wished to avoid. She caught McCleod's watchful eye, and a flush came to her cheeks. With a nod to the two detectives she hurried up the stairs.

McCleod turned to Higson. "I wonder if we could see Mr. Mark Henstone?" he asked casually. "For a few minutes——"

"I believe, sir, that he will be down soon. . . . He is just changing, sir."

"Ah . . . I suppose the rain caught him too?"

"I believe so, sir. . . . Shall I tell him——?"

"Oh . . . Later will do. We won't trouble him again just now."

McCleod shepherded Cary off in the direction of Henstone's study. When the door had closed behind them, the Superintendent burst out angrily.

"Going for a little stroll! Both of 'em! Why didn't you ask her——?"

"Because I didn't want to make a young lady tell a lot of unnecessary lies. She wasn't going to tell us. . . . But I wonder just what has been happening? It was bad enough luck missing the messenger—but that was only an outside chance. It looks as if we've missed something else. What?"

"Obviously they're working together," Cary growled.

"I wouldn't be sure of that—but we must bear it in mind. . . . Hullo! Come in!"

A police constable entered in response to the invitation.

"We've found Mr. Carlton, sir," he announced. "He's waiting outside."

"Any trouble?"

"No trouble, sir. . . . He's in a bit of a temper."

"Ah," said McCleod. "Show him in."

But the constable did not immediately obey. "And there's this note, sir," he said, producing it. "From Dr. Wilton——"

McCleod glanced at it. "All right," he said, and waited until the policeman had gone out. "Very opportune," he said, and passed it over. "The doctor's lifted his ban on the girl. . . . Now we should get something!"

CHAPTER VII

A TANGLED WEB

CARY pulled a chair forward to a position opposite where McCleod was sitting and seated himself on the Inspector's left. He was a great believer in getting the correct atmosphere, and he thought this was probably a case for impressing their witness rather than setting him at his ease. McCleod grinned as the Superintendent adopted what was evidently an official pose.

"The question is, how far do we go?" he said. "Of course, it's natural that I should see him. But I hadn't expected the bobbies to bring him here."

"I'm afraid I was responsible," Cary admitted. "I was getting alibis, you know, for last night. . . . I forgot to tell you. . . . Just in case——"

"Any luck?"

"All I asked said that they were asleep in bed. . . . None of 'em, of course, had any witnesses, except Miss Bramley. The night nurse could swear to her. I missed Carlton and said I wanted him as soon as I could."

"It's just as well. . . . There are one or two little things. And it'll be handy to have his story as fully as possible when we deal with Miss Bramley. . . . Here he comes."

Francis Carlton was certainly not in a particularly good mood, if one could judge by a face which usually managed to betray most of its owner's feelings. But looking at him, McCleod was by no means convinced that annoyance was the young man's principal emotion. Unless the detective was very much mistaken, fear played an equally important part in his mind, and both of the watchers noticed the shrinking glance which he cast towards the wheeled invalid chair which still stood in its accustomed place. Nevertheless, he had evidently determined to carry things off with a high

hand. Before either of them could speak, he burst out angrily:

"What's the meaning of this, Superintendent? Why am I dragged here like this? Your fool of a policeman——!"

"May I introduce Inspector McCleod of Scotland Yard, sir?" The Superintendent intervened with a kind of threatening politeness. "The Inspector has come down to help us with the investigation, sir. This is Mr. Carlton, Inspector."

"Good afternoon, sir," McCleod murmured. "Of course, we're sorry to trouble you again. I've read your statement to the Superintendent, but there are just one or two little points on which I should like to be clearer. I hope you won't mind answering a few questions. And you realize that your answers may be used as evidence."

Whether it was McCleod's pacific manner, or the name of Scotland Yard, Carlton's bellicosity perceptibly diminished; and it seemed to the two detectives that his apprehension increased.

"Well?" he demanded. "What is it?"

"Just one or two little things. For example, how your interview with Mr. Henstone came about. I understand that he made the appointment. Did he at the time give you any hint about the reason for it?"

"None whatever. . . . As a matter of fact, he asked me to collect some proofs from the photographers for him and bring them along. There was no word of anything else."

McCleod shuffled the pile of papers, and held out the photographs.

"These?" he asked. "Would you examine them?"

"Yes."

"Look at them carefully. . . . Were they like that when you brought them?"

"Of course not. . . . Someone's exposed them to the light, and, being proofs, they've not been fixed. The top one——"

"Yes. Quite darkened—except in one place. As though something had been resting on it?"

"Perhaps. It wasn't like that when I left. . . . And, incidentally, they are in a different order. I imagine he had been examining them."

"No doubt." McCleod accepted the photographs and laid them face downwards on the table. "Then you had no other idea in your own mind why your uncle might wish to see you?" he asked.

Carlton hesitated. Up till now, he had been steadily growing more at his ease.

"Well," he said. "I thought he might want to discuss my marriage—with Miss Bramley."

"Discuss it? He knew about it before?"

"Oh, yes. . . . He had always seemed to encourage it. That's why I couldn't understand it when——"

He broke off. McCleod waited to see if he would continue; then prompted him.

"When he said that you were to be dismissed from the office?"

"Yes. . . . And when he'd just said he was leaving me everything——"

"Ah. That's a point I was coming to. . . . Could you tell me exactly what Mr. Henstone's words were when he told you of what he proposed?"

"He said—he said—'I have—I am making my will. . . . Under my will I leave—I shall leave you everything.'"

Even apart from the hesitation in the actual words, the expression on Carlton's face showed how the question had affected him. He had suddenly paled, and he failed to meet McCleod's eyes.

"I beg your pardon," McCleod said politely. "But that is just the point. Did he say 'have made' or 'am making'?"

Carlton looked up with an assumption of confidence. "He said—I am sure he said: 'I am making'——"

"And you understood that, in fact, the will was not yet made?"

"Of course. He hadn't signed it——"

"No. . . . But, in that case——" McCleod spoke deliberately, turning over the pages of the reports. "In that case, Mr. Carlton, why did you protest to the Superintendent when he was questioning you in these words—— Let me see. Ah. Here. 'Even if I do inherit under Mr. Henstone's will, that's no reason why you should think I killed him?' Those were your words, I think."

"I didn't. . . . I didn't. . . . There's some mistake."

"Let us leave it," McCleod said politely. "Here is another point. . . . In her interview with the Superintendent, Miss Bramley states that you went to her and told her what had happened."

"Yes. I did. That was natural, wasn't it?"

"Of course. . . . Unfortunately, Miss Bramley wasn't quite herself and there was one point which she did not make quite clear. Apparently in that interview there was some mention of Mr. Henstone's medicine. . . . Can you tell me exactly how that came to be mentioned?"

Carlton's face was like chalk. "It wasn't—I didn't——" he stammered. "I tell you I never touched the stuff——"

"I see. Another misunderstanding. . . . Unfortunately Miss Bramley's illness has prevented our questioning her on that point. . . . Then it was to plead with Mr. Henstone not to dismiss you that Miss Bramley came here? Was that with your consent?"

"No." This time he was evidently telling the truth. "I knew it was no good. . . . She insisted on coming. I couldn't stop her——"

McCleod inclined his head in assent. "That, I think, is all for the moment—about the day of James Henstone's death," he said. "There is one other point. Can you tell us where you were at, let us say, half-past two this morning?"

"At half-past two?" Carlton echoed the words bewilderedly. "Why, in bed."

"But, I suppose, you can't bring any witnesses to prove it?"

"How on earth could I?" Carlton said in genuine exasperation. "I don't keep a posse of witnesses to see that I'm asleep!"

"Of course not. . . . Well, Mr. Carlton . . . That will be all—for the present. Thank you."

Carlton stared at him for a moment. "Then you're not—I'm not——?" he stammered. "You don't want me?"

"We should be glad if you would remain available for the present," McCleod said mildly. "And, of course, you will be required as a witness at the inquest. . . . Good afternoon!"

Cary was looking a little puzzled as the door closed behind their visitor.

"You let him off pretty lightly," he grumbled. "Seemed to me that whenever you'd got him you let him go again."

McCleod smiled. "He's certainly lying on some points," he said. "Lying because he's afraid. . . . But the point is this. Do we, at the moment, want to charge him with the murder of James Henstone?"

"If he's guilty——" the Superintendent began, and stopped. "Why should he lie if he's innocent?"

"Because he's frightened. You may be quite innocent of something and still frightened about it. But I don't care whether he's innocent or guilty. . . . The great point at present is, do we want to charge him? With Mark behaving more suspiciously than ever? With the various things which have cropped up? We don't. We want things a lot clearer than they are, before we charge anyone. And that's why I didn't push things to extremes. We know he's lying. He knows it. There's no particular point, really, in proving

it just now. . . . And, in the meantime, we've got to see Miss Bramley—who probably will prove it anyhow. Let's get along."

It was only a few minutes' drive from the house to the nursing home, on the outskirts of the town, where Kathleen Bramley had been taken following her breakdown after the discovery of Henstone's death. Cary was obviously dissatisfied, but he said nothing. McCleod was not in a particularly talkative mood. He did not very much like women witnesses; least of all did he like the particularly delicate prospect with which he was faced of having to bully a woman who was lying, and who at any moment might break into hysteria. He was rather relieved to find Dr. Wilton actually in attendance when he arrived there.

"You'll have to be careful," the doctor warned him. "In a sense, she's not really ill at all. . . . But she's a highly strung type. . . . Any objection to my being present?"

"I should be glad if you would," McCleod assented. "And if you think I'm going too far——" He stopped. "I wish we could put this off," he admitted. "But there are one or two things it's vitally important to get settled. And she may be a more important witness even than we think. . . . I'm afraid we must see her."

"Well, if you don't want a nice little case of hysteria on your hands, you'll go gently," Dr. Wilton advised. "I'd better wait here for a bit, till you've done."

McCleod's own opinion coincided with the doctor's as they were shown into the room where Kathleen Bramley was seated, or rather reclining, on a couch waiting for them. Her pallor, the dark lines under her eyes, and the expression of strain on her face were enough to show that her questioning would need to be a very tactful affair. And yet there was some of the interview which could hardly be tactful. The only thing to do seemed to be to save that as far as possible until the end, and take the risk.

Kathleen Bramley made a motion to rise as they were ushered in; but Cary stopped her.

"Don't get up, Miss Bramley," he said. "This is Inspector McCleod, of Scotland Yard, who's come to help us. We're sorry to bother you again, but naturally there are one or two things he wants to ask you himself."

"Won't you—won't you sit down?" she asked in a voice which faltered a little. "Of course, I will tell you anything I can. . . . But there's really nothing more——"

McCleod glanced at Cary, who nodded for him to go ahead. He leant forward a little towards her, and produced from his pocket the typewritten sheets of the statement she had made immediately after Henstone's death.

"I've just been going through all these statements, Miss Bramley," he said pleasantly. "Here's yours. . . . There are just one or two points I should like you to clarify a little. . . . Now, first of all, when Mr. Carlton called on you that morning, you weren't particularly expecting a visit?"

There had been a trace of uneasiness, if not fear in her eyes at the sight of the typewritten sheets; but evidently she found nothing very alarming in the first question.

"In a sense, I was," she answered. "Francis comes to see me every day. He would come in the morning if he had time, of course."

"But you had nothing particular to discuss? Your marriage, I understand, was already arranged. . . . There was no intention of asking Mr. Henstone for any help?"

"Oh, no. . . . It really wouldn't have been necessary. . . . We could have managed quite well on Francis's salary—if only—if only——"

"So, naturally, it was a great blow to you both when Mr. Henstone took the line he did. . . . Especially as I understand that previously he had shown no signs of opposing it?"

"He was actually in favour of it, so far as we could tell. And Francis was always a favourite—I mean, he seemed to get on with Mr. Henstone better than—than his nephew did."

"I believe you had known Mr. Mark Henstone fairly well?" McCleod asked innocently. He had noticed the reluctance to speak the name. "That was before you met Mr. Carlton?"

"Yes." She flushed, hesitated for a minute and went on quickly. "In a way, it was through Mark that I met him. . . ." She broke off, and looked up defiantly. "But I wasn't in love with Mark. There was nothing—really. Only I don't think Mark quite understood——"

"There was some ill-feeling between Mark Henstone and Mr. Carlton?"

"Yes. . . . No. . . . Not really. . . . They just avoided each other."

McCleod nodded, though with the feeling that, for anyone of Mark's restrained personality, the mere act of avoiding anyone might indicate a very considerable depth of feeling.

"You had no idea that there was to be any mention of the will when Mr. Carlton went to see Mr. Henstone?"

"No. . . . And I'm sure Francis hadn't."

"And he came back to you as soon as he left Mr. Henstone. . . . I should like to know your impression as to his state of mind then."

"He—he was—rather upset. . . . Of course, it meant the end of all our plans. We didn't know what to do."

"He was angry with Mr. Henstone?"

"He—he—he was more stunned than anything else. He hardly knew what he was saying——"

McCleod glanced at the typewritten sheet. "That was when he mentioned the medicine?" he said ruthlessly. "And there was some allusion to the linament—the poison. Wasn't there?"

She did not answer. The Inspector waited for a moment. His face hardened.

"Come, Miss Bramley," he said. "We have your original statement to the effect that there was such an allusion. Exactly what was it?"

"I—I don't remember. . . . I was upset. . . . That was what I thought myself. . . . He didn't say it."

"You thought what?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes were blazing.

"That—that I wished he was dead!" she said violently. "That I wished someone could have made a mistake about the poison."

"But Mr. Carlton, in fact, did not express such a wish?"

"No." The word was barely audible. "I—I thought that——"

"So, when you went to see Mr. Henstone, it was purely to plead with him not to dismiss Mr. Carlton? There was no other idea in your mind."

"No."

"Then, why was it so vitally necessary to see him before eleven o'clock?"

Evidently that shot went home. She did not answer, but sat staring at him with eyes full of terror. He changed his ground.

"Did you see Mr. Henstone that morning?"

"They—they wouldn't let me in. . . . How could I? . . . I was still waiting when—when they found him."

"You could have got in—you did get in—through the french window. . . . After Higson left you—when you disappeared somewhere. Miss Bramley, we know you got in. . . . Your fingerprints appear on the bottle—the poison bottle——"

There was the sound of an argument, and something very like a scuffle from the next room. Then the door burst open suddenly. Francis Carlton appeared, followed by the doctor, dishevelled and angry. He stood for a

moment looking at the group about the couch. Then he stepped forward with a curious air of resolution.

"Inspector McCleod," he said, and his voice did not tremble. "I have a statement to make. . . . I killed Mr. Henstone. . . . I believed that the will had already been signed. I was mad—because he—he had sacked me. I poured in the linament, when he asked me to put in more water. . . . That is all I have to say."

McCleod had risen to his feet. He stood looking at the young man with an expression of something like resignation on his face.

"You would be prepared to sign a statement to that effect?" he asked, without enthusiasm. "I must warn you, sir, that anything you say may be used in evidence at your trial, and that a charge of wilful murder may be preferred against you."

"I will sign the statement. . . . I will give you any further details you wish——"

"But—but—Francis!" Kathleen Bramley had sprung to her feet. "It isn't—it isn't true!" she burst out. "You can't——"

Francis Carlton did not look at her. He kept his eyes upon McCleod.

"I will sign the statement——" Then his self-control gave way. "What are you waiting for? Why don't you arrest me? I'm guilty—I tell you I'm guilty!"

"Very well, Mr. Carlton," McCleod said after a pause. "Then I must ask you to accompany us to the police station——"

There was a strangled cry from the girl. Superintendent Cary was just in time to catch her as she fell.

CHAPTER VIII

GOOD INTENTIONS

CELIA VERNON was feeling distinctly worried. All that afternoon she had been pondering over the interview which she had overheard that morning, and she was no nearer to finding a solution to the problem. It was obvious that Mark Henstone was going to do something which might have serious consequences, and which, if he had to pay a blackmailer, could hardly work out to his advantage. That was how she interpreted the offer that had been made, and apparently accepted, and although she had only known Mark for a few days she was quite sure that he needed someone to look after him.

Think as she might, however, she could not seem to find any way of helping him. She could hardly go and deliver a general lecture on the subject of deceiving the police, bad company, and possible blackmail. On the other hand, it was no less impossible to go to him and say: "Look here, you're going to make a fool of yourself to-night. Take my advice and don't have anything to do with it." However delicately she might put it, she could hardly escape questions about how she knew of his proposed expedition, and the answer that she happened to overhear the conversation while lying behind a hedge was not likely to be well received.

Besides, Mark was singularly elusive. He had lunched alone, apparently, and all that day she had only caught two hurried glimpses of him in the distance, and once close at hand when he was talking to McCleod. By dinner-time she was getting desperate, and when she had made a poor meal again without having the opportunity to see him, she made her way to the office with the feeling that time was getting horribly short.

She was so evidently troubled when Higson came in to lock up and close the shutters that the butler, who had apparently been good enough to approve of her, ventured a fatherly protest.

"You're working very hard, miss," he said with a suggestion of reproof. "You mustn't overdo it and upset yourself, miss."

"Oh . . . There's a lot to do," Celia said vaguely, and it was quite true, even if she had hardly done a stroke of it. For a moment she had the impulse to take the butler into her confidence; but she rejected it. "You're locking up early?" she asked, just for the sake of having something to say.

"Well, miss," Higson said confidentially, "as a matter of fact, it's police orders. After what happened last night. You see, all these lower windows would be quite easy to get into, if there should be another burglary, miss."

For the first time it occurred to Celia that they would also be easy to get out of. Moreover, since the butler was locking them now, it was not likely that he would come round again. Behind the drawn curtains an unlatched window would never be noticed. The beginnings of a plan were forming in her mind. If she could not catch Mark in the house it should be possible to intercept him outside, and she had come to the conclusion that she must do just that, however her eavesdropping might appear.

"But surely they're not expecting another?" she asked as he finished and was on the point of leaving.

"Well, miss, I don't know. . . . But there's certainly nothing to worry about. There are police on duty all round the house. . . . I saw one, miss, just by the garage, and there's another in the orchard."

The information came as rather a shock to Celia. It was a complication which she had not foreseen, though the precaution was obvious enough, of course. She tried to dissemble her interest in it and laughed.

"They should be able to deal with anyone who tries to get in then," she said lightly.

"Yes, miss—or not. . . . Perhaps I oughtn't to repeat it, miss, but from something I heard the Superintendent say I understood that they'd made arrangements to follow anyone leaving the house, miss."

"Surely that's going rather far," Celia said with an attempt at a casual manner.

"It is, miss," Higson said with mournful disapproval. "There's nothing you require, miss?"

"No, thank you . . . Good night."

As the door closed behind the butler, Celia thought quickly. There was no doubt about it now. Mark must be warned. Otherwise, unaware of the police supervision, he would duly meet Little, and conduct a police watcher to Broughton House, where he could almost be relied upon to get himself caught in some compromising situation. The first thing to do seemed to be to find out where the police were, and she had not much time to waste. Higson's steps were still receding down the passage when she crossed to the window, unfastened it; then went back and switched out the light. Within two or three minutes of his departure, she was standing on the terrace, with the night air feeling unpleasantly cold and damp through her thin frock.

One watcher was by the garage; another in the orchard. Those were on adjoining sides; so that it looked as if the watchers had been stationed at least one on each side, with probably one at the drive gate as well. She tried to work out Mark's probable line of action. He was not likely to leave the house by the front door. That morning he had used the library window, and in all probability he would repeat the performance. And then? If he did not know of the police watchers, the car would be the natural way of getting to the station. She decided first of all to locate the man by the garage; and after standing for a moment to

listen, she moved noiselessly off along the pavement.

Undoubtedly that would be Mark's way. The library window was at the far end of the house; it was only a step or two to the garage. As she reached the terrace end, she went even more cautiously, alert for any sign of the guard, and stopping at short intervals to peer about her and listen.

In the event, her caution was hardly necessary. Apparently the policeman on duty did not take his work very seriously; or perhaps he thought it was too early for anything to happen. She had almost reached the garage, and could even make out the outline of its roof against the sky when the flare of a match from behind an evergreen shrub told her all that she wanted to know. A moment later, a whiff of strong tobacco came to her nostrils, and before the match went out she caught a glimpse of the man himself.

She smiled to think what Cary or the Inspector would have said at this casual interpretation of watching. That man, at least, should not offer any great danger. She glanced at her wrist watch. It was still too early for Mark. There was time to try the other side of the house at least—perhaps the gate as well. To do that she must somehow pass the smoker. Dodging round the bushes she gained the lawn, and started to make a circuit, her feet making no sound on the soft turf. And she had hardly gone a dozen paces before she heard a window close softly, and steps advancing along the terrace.

Mark, if it was Mark, was coming with an amazing lack of precaution. And he was much earlier than she had expected. By car it would only take about five minutes to get the train. And yet she was practically sure that it was he. She recognized the footsteps. Unfortunately, there was no chance of warning him. He had passed the watcher apparently without observing either him or the hastily extinguished pipe. While she was still hesitating,

she heard the click of a key in the lock. Then the door opened. After a moment's pause, there was the bright glow of the side-lamps being switched on.

It was certainly Mark. She even caught a glimpse of him as he moved round to the front of the car, apparently to flood the carburettor.

The watcher had probably seen him too. In the light from the garage, she could just make out the shape of his figure. All at once from where he was standing, came the flash of a torch, three times repeated. There was a pause. He seemed to be looking down the drive towards the gates, and Celia glanced round, just in time to catch the answering signal. The man by the garage repeated the flash, this time in two rather longer bursts. From the gate came a single answering gleam, and darkness came again.

Inside the garage, Mark was apparently trying to start the car, and having trouble in doing so. She heard the dull jar and whine of the self-starter; the engine fired for a second or two, and then gave out. The self-starter worked again, and the same thing happened. Mark must be getting worried. He was using the self-starter again and again, with a reckless disregard for the batteries. The noise was repeated with a regularity which was positively monotonous. And then she heard the police watcher give an exclamation. The next instant he had abandoned all pretence at concealment, and stood staring into the garage.

"Bolted, by God!"

The self-starter still whirred. For a half-minute Celia was puzzled; then she understood. Mark had never intended to use the car. He had been aware of the watchers—probably he had derived his information from the same source as she herself had done. He had set the automatic starter going, after some slight adjustment of the petrol or air, and while she and the policeman had been listening to it, had quietly slipped out by the small door at the back.

Celia did not know what to do. He had several minutes'

start, and evidently he had not left the grounds by the drive and the main gate. Her only hope, if she was to catch him, was to get him at the station, and she herself could not possibly find her way except by the drive. There was no time to lose. While the policeman was still staring into the garage, and apparently before he had made up his mind what to do, she was running across the lawn, taking the straight line across the arc of the drive's curve. Then she felt the road beneath her feet, and turned towards the gate.

How she was to pass the watcher there she did not know. From the position of the flash she could place him with some accuracy, and she guessed that he must be in the bushes on the right-hand side. Then, as she rounded the last bend and came within view the problem was solved for her. The headlamps of a car gleamed along the lane, approached the gate, and turned, illuminating the whole roadway so that she had to jump hurriedly for cover. And in the same moment she saw a figure jump into the roadway and hold up his hand.

Apparently there was some kind of an argument. The man in the car was urging something; the policeman remained obdurate. She crept closer, safe in the knowledge that both men must be blinded by the headlamps. She was within a few yards when the policeman gave a nod of assent. The car backed out of the drive, luckily in the direction which threw the beams away from her, and stopped in the lane just outside the gate.

A man got out. As he advanced into the illuminated area, she recognized Newley, and the manager was evidently in a bad temper. She caught a few words as he crossed the drive towards the lodge.

"—a lot of damned silly red tape. . . . Very well, I'll phone, and if——"

The watcher said something placatingly. She heard the knock at the door, and just as it opened took her chance. Inside a couple of seconds she had passed them. It was only

with the slamming of the car door that they became aware of her existence. She heard them shouting as the engine fired; caught a glimpse of two running figures as she let in the clutch, and then she was speeding down the road.

For a few minutes it really seemed as if she had got clean away. By good fortune the car had been pointing in the direction of the town. With its help, she could certainly get to the station before Mark, even with the start which he had, and by whatever short cuts he might take. And in any case she would be there before nine o'clock, and the arrival of the train. Of course, she must leave the car somewhere before she reached her destination. But no one had seen her take it. And then she was aware of a persistent little spot of light in the driving mirror, which followed her at a distance of two or three hundred yards.

Newley evidently had a fine taste in powerful cars, and for half a mile the road was straight. She accelerated, feeling a certain thrill as the needle jumped from fifty, to sixty—sixty-five—seventy—— It was faster than she had ever driven in her life. Then a curve ahead made her decelerate abruptly. She looked in the mirror. The spot of light was neither nearer nor further away. The motor-cyclist, apparently, had a machine equal to anything she could do. She tried driving slowly, with the same result. There was no doubt about it. She was being followed.

The signal made by the man at the garage came into her mind. Of course the police had provided against the contingency of anyone leaving by car, and the follower had actually been warned when she got there. Somehow she must throw him off; but she puzzled her brain in vain as she steadily neared the town, driving at a normal pace. She was almost in sight of the first houses when it disappeared. She waited for a moment; then actually stopped the car. A minute passed; two minutes; but the motor-cyclist did not come. Something had happened to him, or he had given it up. Whichever it was, she must make the

most of it. A grassy lane leading off the road just beyond where she had stopped seemed made for her purpose. Slipping into bottom gear, she bumped her way to a point out of sight of the road, switched off the light and got out.

A few minutes brought her to the station. It was twenty to nine. From the time-table, she ascertained that the nine o'clock included in its list of stopping places the name Broughton Halt, though it continued a mile or two beyond there to the next town. Keeping well in the shadow, but with her eyes fixed on the gate, she waited with what patience she could muster for Mark to arrive.

It was getting late, and she was both tired and hungry. Not having expected any such lengthy trip, she had left her coat, and the rain was beginning to fall again in a steady drizzle. Several times she was on the point of giving it up and by four minutes to nine she was inclined to believe that there was some mistake. And then Mark came; but with a sickening disappointment she saw that he was not alone. Little was already with him.

They hurried across just as the train, for once on time, puffed into the station. There was no chance for even a word with Mark alone. To speak to him meant doing what she was particularly anxious to avoid, and that was calling attention either to the two men or herself. She stood for an instant in indecision; then, on a sudden impulse, while Mark was actually getting into the carriage and Little waited with his back towards her, she slipped unseen across the platform, and gained the compartment two doors away from them.

Luckily it was empty. As the train puffed out, she had time to collect her thoughts, and her first was that she was a fool. Without even a hat or coat, she had set off on a chase which seemed to have no end to it. She had evaded the police, stolen a car, and was now travelling, distinctly wet, in a train, without a ticket, and not quite sure of her destination.

Obviously there would be a difficulty at the halt. She would have to pay her fare. Luckily she had money with her; but it might enable them to get away; or they might see her. But if they did? She was all at once aware that she no longer intended to warn Mark. Now that she had come so far, the obvious thing was to follow and see what happened, and with a slight shock she realized that she had practically made up her mind already to do just that.

The ticket problem solved itself with the arrival of the guard at the station before the halt. She duly paid, aware of his curious glance. That raised another problem. In all probability there would only be a few passengers getting on or off. If they kept any kind of watch whatever, they would be likely to see her if she followed. The solution came to her just as the train slowed down before the bare platform. Before it had even stopped she had the door open. She was on the platform and through the gate before their door was open.

Outside in the road, she glanced round hurriedly. Mark and Little were getting out. She must hide somewhere. Then the sight of the solitary two-seater drawn up outside the station entrance changed her plan. By the bonnet stood a man smoking, obviously waiting for someone coming by train, and apart from herself, Mark and Little had been the only two passengers. It could only be for them. The driver had given a single curious glance at her. He stepped forward as Mark and his companion approached. It was her chance. The dickey seat was just beside her, and luckily it was open. The next moment she had clambered into it.

With her heart in her mouth she waited. It only occurred to her too late that, if the man with the cigarette was accompanying them, the rear seat would be needed. But apparently he was not. There was a brief conversation, of which she caught only the driver's words—"leave it in

the yard——” She heard Little chuckle. Then a door slammed and with a jerk they started forward into the darkness.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHASE BEGINS

AT a quarter-past eight that evening, Cary and McCleod were just concluding a lengthy and exasperating session with Mr. Bembridge on the subject of Francis Carlton's confession. As luck would have it, the lawyer had been away from town that afternoon; but the news had reached him as soon as he returned. It brought him immediately, eager to know why Carlton had been charged with the murder; or why he had not; and he was far from content with the Superintendent's explanation that as a matter of fact neither was exactly true, but that Francis Carlton had simply of his own free will surrendered to police supervision, pending the further investigation of the confession which he had made.

McCleod had succeeded in calming him to some extent, and his final move was masterly in its way, as a temporary expedient; for if there was one thing which the lawyer refused to believe it was that Mark Henstone or any of the Henstone family could stoop so low as murder.

“You see, sir,” he said soothingly, “there's an obvious reason why Mr. Carlton might have made a false confession—because he thought it might acquit Miss Bramley. And for that reason, even though there is a certain amount of evidence to support what he says, we weren't anxious to press the charge, at least until we'd had time to go into a possibility which had occurred to us. . . . I mean, sir, that James Henstone wasn't murdered by a member of his

family, or on account of the will but by someone whom he had known—well, in that particular part of his life which he didn't say much about."

"Ha!" Mr. Bembridge said with obvious satisfaction. "Yes. That is a possibility—certainly a possibility worth investigating." He paused, and then his natural clarity of thought got the better of his inclination. "Yet I should have said that certain obvious points rather suggested—er—someone familiar with the ways of the house."

"Such as, sir?"

"Well—the fact that whoever poisoned the medicine could obtain access at all. . . . And then, presumably the murderer knew that the medicine would be taken at eleven, and that the linament was poisonous. . . . Not to mention the fact that there seems to have been almost a deliberate attempt to cast suspicion upon Mark Henstone."

"May I deal with those points, sir? And I'll take the last one first. I don't think there's any deliberate attempt to put suspicion on Mr. Mark or Mr. Carlton. That arose quite accidentally out of Henstone's own actions. . . . But suppose one had known Henstone years ago, and meant to kill him. Naturally one would make a few inquiries first. . . . And how long, sir, would you have to be in the local pub, say, before you had a pretty fair idea of James Henstone's character, and the relations he was on with his family?"

Mr. Bembridge grunted disapprovingly. McCleod had not known that he was a strict teetotaler.

"No doubt," he said. "These places are perfect hot-beds of gossip. Yes. I am afraid that is true."

"About obtaining access. . . . I suggest, sir, that if I was an old friend or enemy of Henstone's and wasn't in particularly prosperous circumstances or likely to be welcome, I shouldn't go knocking at the front door, because I should almost certainly be refused admission. I should scout round quietly, try to find him alone, and perhaps scare

him into seeing me. . . . And in this case, the odds seem considerable that one would have found him asleep."

"Perhaps," Bembridge thought. "And, in fact," he said, brightening, "suppose one had, say, been refused admission at the lodge gate and had been determined to get in. There is the small gate into the garden from the paddock, and Henstone's room would be almost the first one came across."

"And then as to the poison. The medicine was in the glass, ready to be taken, and obviously Mr. Henstone was going to take it sooner or later. When doesn't matter very much. And the poison was in a blue bottle conspicuously labelled. Supposing one had come to do the job, say, with a piece of lead piping, it wouldn't have needed much imagination or knowledge to see that the linament might be simpler and safer."

"Quite," Bembridge assented. "And yet, all this is purely hypothetical. . . . Unless you have found traces of such an acquaintance?"

McClcod hesitated. "Well, we think perhaps that we have, sir. He had recently received a letter referring to the old days from a man named Little? I don't know if the name conveys anything to you?"

"Little?" Bembridge echoed thoughtfully, and shook his head. "No. I am afraid not."

"Well, sir, that's why we're anxious to find out all we can about Mr. James Henstone's past. . . . And if it is any friend or member of the family who has committed the crime, I'm inclined to think that the motive may lie buried there rather than be the obvious one of the proposed will."

"You mean——?"

"It's my idea that it might be worth while looking through those surrounding Mr. Henstone for someone who knew him in the early years. . . . Now, sir, I suppose that you've known him as long as anyone, and know as much about his life as anyone——"

Bembridge threw a slightly startled glance at the Inspector; and it was only then that McCleod realized the possible implication of his question.

"Really, Inspector, I know very little," the solicitor answered a little hastily. "I am, of course, well acquainted with the affairs of the family as a whole. But at that time Mr. James Henstone was very much separated from his family. . . . I think you will find that there is a better informant available. I mean, Mr. Newley."

"Newley," McCleod said reflectively. "Yes. I wanted to see him. You can't tell me, for example, anything of his connexion with the place he mentioned when he was dying—'Broughton House'?"

"No. I have never heard him mention it."

McCleod thought a moment. "How did he earn his living during those years?" he asked.

"I must refer you to Mr. Newley," Bembridge said stiffly. "I believe he did some journalism—or that was what he called it. But I understand it was connected with racing tips. He was at sea for some years, tried his hand at painting, was assistant to a bookmaker——" He broke off and glanced at the clock. "Mr. Newley can give you more details," he said. "I must really be going."

Cary grinned a little as the door closed behind their visitor.

"Did you mean that?" he asked.

"Mean what?" the Inspector asked a little absently.

"To give Bembridge a hint you suspected him? Anyway, it had the effect of getting rid of him."

"I don't suspect him more than most other people. But, after all, one would expect him to know something of Henstone's past, if anyone."

Cary studied him for a moment. "And did you mean all that stuff about looking at his past for a motive rather than the making of the will and so on?" he asked.

"On the whole, I think I did. . . . By the way, have you discovered anything about Broughton House?"

"Found three of them so far. One's fifty miles away, one thirty, and one twenty-two—but the last's a girl's school. . . . I'm just trying to get the dope on them at the——"

The ringing of the phone interrupted him. He picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he said, and listened for a minute. "Who?" he demanded. "Good Lord! . . . All right. We'll be over directly."

He met McCleod's inquiring gaze. "Speak of angels," he said lightly. "Mr. Newley wants to see us very urgently. . . . Apparently he buzzed up to the house, having special information that Mark was going to this place we've been talking about—Broughton House. They wouldn't let him go up to the house without phoning first. While they were doing it, someone—presumably Mark—beat it in Newley's car. At least, when the police made an inquiry at the house, they discovered that Mark was missing. . . . And what's particularly interesting is that that girl—the secretary—can't be found either."

McCleod frowned. "Let's go," he said hastily. "I thought the house was watched? And that anyone leaving it—particularly Mark—was to be shadowed."

Cary gave a dissatisfied grunt. "I gather that Mark deceived our man by a trick which wouldn't take a child in. . . . Left the car with the automatic starter running and walked out. . . . As for the motor-cyclist, he did follow. Maybe we'll hear from him presently."

But the first news they heard was not from him, but of him. He had been found lying in the ditch a mile or so away from the house, and a very mangled rabbit on the roadway beside his smashed machine.

Cary did not say much about that. After all, it was a piece of bad luck which might have happened to anyone.

But there was a glint in his eye as he spoke to the sergeant in charge which boded little good to that officer as soon as he had a quarter of an hour to spare.

"Where's Newley?" he demanded. "What is all this?"

Newley was only too eager to explain. He had heard Mark talking to a white-haired man named Little. They had said something about the will, and apparently Little had offered to find it at a price. They had gone to Broughton House.

"Which Broughton?" Cary demanded.

"I don't know. . . . They said something about taking the train——"

"That's the Broughton Halt one, then . . . How the hell does one get there?"

"I'll guide if you like," Newley volunteered eagerly. It was apparent that Mark was no favourite of his—perhaps because Francis Carlton was. "For Heaven's sake, let's hurry . . . If he gets the will and destroys it——"

"Why should he destroy it?" McCleod demanded. "If Little offered to show it to him, isn't it likely it's in his favour?"

Newley shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe," he said. "And they've twenty minutes' start already——"

"Broughton's in the next County," Cary said reflectively, and then turned to the sergeant. "You'd better get on to the local Inspector," he snapped. "Tell him what's happening, and ask him to meet us with any men he can raise. Say at the Broughton police station. . . . Jones, you drive. Mr. Newley will guide you. . . . And you . . ." He turned to the crestfallen men who had been on duty. "You'd better take a good look round the garden," he said. "Look out particularly for any traces of the girl . . . This may be a worse business than we think——"

There was a horrified look in the sergeant's eyes at the possibilities this suggested might arise from his failure.

"But, sir, you don't think——" he began.

Cary vouchsafed him no answer, but slammed the car door. As they jerked forward he caught McCleod's curious eye.

"What d'you expect to find in the garden?" the Inspector asked. "I should have thought it was pretty plain that Mark and the girl had gone together."

"I don't expect 'em to find anything," Cary admitted. "But it's a nice, wet, dark night, and those shrubberies are full of holly bushes and gorse. . . . I reckon by the time they've finished, they'll know enough to keep a better look out next time . . . And after all, it shows our zeal, and can't do much harm!"

McCleod chuckled, and then divided his attention between the route and eliciting further particulars as far as possible from Newley. Apparently they were going direct across country by the map, and though it might be the most direct way, the Inspector was by no means sure that it was the quickest. Cross-roads followed cross-roads, and fork followed fork, but the manager was never at fault. Sometimes the lanes along which they were travelling were so narrow and enclosed that if they had met anything they would certainly have had to turn back; but there was luckily little enough on the road at that time of night, and the few cyclists they encountered pulled up into the hedge. At intervals a white painted signpost showed all manner of improbable village names, but it was some time before they encountered the name they were looking for. They had been travelling for something like half an hour when Newley indicated a post with a gesture which was not without triumph.

"Broughton, $5\frac{1}{2}$ mls."

Cary was relieved. For some time past he had been afraid that they had missed their way. McCleod, on the other hand seemed to have surrendered himself entirely to their guide, and he scarcely troubled to glance through the windows. Instead, he devoted his attention to obtaining

more details from Newley, whenever the intricacy of the road permitted him to answer. Apparently it had been mere chance that had led to his overhearing the conversation. He had been to inquire after Kathleen Bramley, and was taking a short cut back through the fields. He had heard voices just as he was on the point of mounting a stile, and had recognized Mark's. With some embarrassment he admitted that he had deliberately eavesdropped, and the first few words had told him that it was important. Mark had given the man money. They were to meet at the station to catch the nine train. Mark had suggested that he should bring the will, but Little had refused. . . .

McCleod, Cary thought, was pursuing his cross-examination almost to extremes. He had asked for the most irrelevant details, but so far as the Superintendent could see the manager was never at a loss. No, he had not had a good view of Little. He seemed to be an oldish man—at least his hair was grey; poorly dressed, rather below medium height. He had never had a proper view of the face.

A question occurred to Cary himself. "Exactly when was this?" he asked. "What time?"

For the first time Newley hesitated. "Well, it was some time after six," he said reluctantly. "I couldn't swear to within half an hour or so. Say half-past six or seven."

Cary registered another black mark against the sergeant and his guards; for by that time the watchers should have been posted and on the alert. The thought made his next question even more bad-tempered in tone than it might otherwise have been.

"Then why the dev——?" he began, and just stopped. "And you waited until now to tell us, sir!" he snapped.

Newley hesitated. "Well," he said after quite a long pause. "The fact is, I wasn't sure whether to tell you or not. . . . It didn't seem to me that it was my business to get Mark into trouble. . . . I'd an idea that I'd come along before he left and stop him somehow. . . . But I was too late——"

Just what Cary would have said in answer to that remained unspoken for, at that moment, the first houses of a village appeared in view, and a moment later a yellow sign announced "Broughton". Just beyond the church a neat, whitewashed house bore the legend County Police, and they pulled up outside.

There was no sign that anyone was expecting them. The windows were in complete darkness, and only a thunderous knocking finally produced the constable, buttoning up his collar, and obviously just awakened from a nap by the kitchen fire. He was inclined to be a little irritable until the identity of his visitors was revealed to him.

"No, sir. . . . Of course, I'd heard nothing," he apologized hastily. "And being up late last night, sir——"

"Never mind about that. . . . You've not been told——?"

"How could they, sir? There's no phone here, sir. . . . I believe they've applied several times——"

Cary was inclined to be irritable. "I suppose when they want you they send a boy on a bicycle from ten miles away," he said savagely. "And then they wonder why the rural police aren't more efficient." It was a point on which, having a large, unwieldy rural area to deal with himself, he was inclined to be sensitive. He glared at the constable. "Then what'll happen?"

"Probably the Inspector will come here himself in a car, sir. . . . Broughton House, you said, sir? Now, where would that be?"

"Good Lord, that's exactly what we wanted you to tell us!" Cary snapped. "I suppose you know your district?"

"Yes, sir," the constable flushed. "I mean, sir, there's no house here called that, so far as I know. . . . But there's only one house it could be, sir. The empty place on the hill just outside."

"Empty?" McCleod asked gently. "How does that come about?"

"It's been empty these twenty years, sir. . . . Before my time, that was. . . . You see, a man called Robinson built it, meaning to retire there. A fine place it must have been too—and the furniture must have cost a pretty penny—though the whole place has gone to a wreck now. I go up that way about once a week, just to keep an eye on the place, and old Mrs. Vesey down at the cottages keeps an eye on the place, and does a bit of tidying up—though I reckon it's not very much she does, with her rheumatism, though I expect she keeps the place aired——"

"How did it come to be empty?" McCleod said gently.

"Well, you see, the man Robinson died suddenly——"

"Died suddenly, eh?" Cary asked with some eagerness. "How was that?"

"Knocked down by a car, sir, I believe. Somewhere in London. He was a Londoner originally. . . . Well, the widow wouldn't live there any more. And she wouldn't sell it, sir, and she wouldn't let it. And so there the place is. . . . I suppose she's always meant to come back. But she never does."

McCleod nodded slowly. After all, the case of Broughton House was less remarkable than one might think. There are quite a number of derelict houses lying about the countryside, and even in towns.

"It's never been let?" he asked.

"No, sir. . . . It's never been lived in at all, barring the six months Robinson was there at the first. . . . Of course, it's awkward having a place empty like that—though it's well locked up and so on——"

There was the sound of a car outside. It proved to be the Inspector whose presence they so urgently needed, complete with a sergeant and several constables, and rather excited at the prospect of at last having something to do with a case which he had secretly regarded with a certain envy. He professed to have a full knowledge of Broughton House and its surroundings, and had already worked out a

magnificent plan by which he with his police should approach from one side, while Cary, McCleod and their driver, guided by the local constable, completed the encircling movement on the village side.

There was no time for argument, and, strictly speaking, it was the Inspector's province. They were squeezing into the car before either McCleod or Cary thought about Newley.

"He'd better come," McCleod suggested. "If he doesn't mind. . . . You see, we can't very well leave him alone anywhere——"

"Oh, all right," Cary said with resignation. "But for goodness sake let's go!"

The inclusion of Williams, the local constable, made it a distinctly tight fit. Newley, it appeared, was positively eager to come; and that was all to the good, McCleod thought. His real reason for desiring the presence of the manager was to make quite certain that if anything happened that night, of the various suspects in the murder of Henstone, Carlton, in jail, and Newley, with them, could not conceivably take any part in it. But he was not feeling optimistic. In fact, it was with distinct premonition of approaching evil that he settled himself in the seat as the car at last started forward.

CHAPTER X

BROUGHTON HOUSE

CROUCHING uncomfortably in the dickey-seat, Celia Vernon was praying that the journey before them was not a long one. The wind blew coldly through her wet clothes and she was shivering before they had gone a quarter of a mile. Also, for the first time in her life, she was realizing the truth

of Napoleon's saying that an army marches on its stomach. If she had taken the precaution of having an adequate meal before setting off, she felt that she would have been twice as brave. As it was an awkward, gnawing feeling of emptiness was added to her other unpleasant emotions.

In the intervals between trying to dodge the trickles of water from the hood, she found herself wondering anxiously what was going to happen at the end of their drive. She had failed to stop Mark. It remained to be seen whether she could do any earthly good by going with him. Ought she to reveal her presence? It seemed to her that now that depended completely on circumstances, and the more important question was whether she could possibly keep herself hidden. At the station luck had been altogether on her side, not merely in her escape from being seen, but in her actual choice as a refuge of the vehicle which Mark and the other man were using. That kind of luck obviously could not hold. If she was discovered, what would happen? It was some comfort that one of the two conspirators was Mark; but none at all that the other was Little. She thoroughly disliked the man. Obviously he had some kind of a hold on Mark, and he might be able to force him into doing all kinds of things which would be better left undone.

If she were discovered——? Even so far as concerned Mark it became more and more clear that the excuse for her presence was terribly unconvincing.

"I came to warn you," she said to herself. "I came——"

She repeated it several times, in difficult tones of voice. At the end she felt like Piglet in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Sometimes it seemed as if it did mean what she wanted it to mean, and sometimes it did not. In any case, that particular opening was absurd. Obviously, Mark had already known that the police were likely to be watching him, and he had taken his precautions—with complete success. Besides, she had had every opportunity of warning him,

and had not been able to bring herself to the point—at the house, at the station, even when they left the train. What was hard to explain was precisely why she was in the back of the car, and she admitted to herself that it was partly curiosity as well as sympathy for Mark which had brought her.

They had been bumping along for some time, over roads which were obviously only moderate when she saw the dark outlines of houses. It was a village, and from the fact that only a few lights were burning in the upper windows she guessed that it must be getting late. They passed right through, beyond the last cottages and out again into what seemed to be open country. The drive seemed as if it would last for ever, and she was feeling horribly cold. Then, just beyond a fork in the road, they turned sharply to the left. On each side the uncut bushes almost touched the car. They were on a narrow, grassy track now, and she guessed that they must be nearing their destination.

With mingled sensations of relief and anxiety she felt the car slowing down. All at once both the head and the sidelights were switched off. They crawled along a little further in the darkness, cannoning at intervals off the verges of the grass. At last the car stopped.

With a quickly-beating heart she waited to see what would happen. The near-side door opened, and Little got out. She could not see him, but Mark had been in the driver's seat, and so it must be Little. She waited to see whether Mark would also get out, but he made no move. Little appeared for an instant as a black shadow, then was swallowed in the darkness. She raised herself slightly and ventured to look round. They did not seem to be near a house or anything else that she could see. There was only the double line of bushes which hedged the road showing as a blacker silhouette against the sky. They had simply stopped in the lane.

From somewhere ahead came the click of a latch and the screech of rusted hinges. It was plain enough now. Evidently Little had got out to open a gate. She ducked back quickly as she heard him returning. With a few words to Mark which she could not distinguish he got back into the car, and they started forward again, still without lights. A few yards further on they turned sharply to the right, bumped over what appeared to be the surface of a field and finally jerked to a halt.

This time both got out. Celia held her breath. If they came round to the back of the car, dark though it was, there was the chance that they might see her; for the well of the dickey was so full of tools and mysterious lumber of one kind and another that she could not get right down out of sight. Perhaps there was even something there which they might need. But a minute later her anxiety was relieved. Mark joined Little, and as they moved forward she heard Little speaking.

"That's the place. . . . It's a queer old Barracks, I can tell you. . . . Not afraid of ghosts, I hope, Mr. Henstone? It's haunted!"

"Let's get on," Mark snapped irritably, and his companion laughed.

"You're in a hurry, are you? Wonder if it'll suit you when you get it? Not that it matters. Thanks to Will Little, you've a 'heads I win, tails you lose' proposition here. If you want the will there it is; if you don't, who's to know if it vanishes?"

"You are," Celia said mentally, and one part of Little's plan became clear to her. If Mark could be induced to destroy the will in order to obtain his uncle's estate, Little would have a hold on him which only his death could wipe out. But Mark's answer to that came instantly.

"I've said that I shan't destroy it."

Little laughed. "As you like. . . . Did I leave that chisel in the car?"

"Chisel?" Mark demanded. "Why do you want that? I thought that you'd arranged about the key?"

Little chuckled. "Oh yes. I got the key. . . . No, the chisel's not to break in with—and not to cut wood with either. Nor stone. . . . You'll see soon enough. . . . Ah, here it is!"

He chuckled again. Apparently he derived an amusement which was almost senile from Mark's mystification; but his companion was not in a mood to indulge it.

"Look here," he snapped. "Stop playing the fool. . . . I'm paying you to get this job over, not to make silly jokes. . . . Let's get what we came for and leave."

"Get it?" Little echoed in a curious voice, and then chuckled again. "Get it? I never promised to get it. . . . I'll show it you, and you can please yourself about taking it away! I'll bet you don't. . . . You'd better do as I say—destroy it if it doesn't suit. . . . Why throw away money that's as good as yours already, and that ought to be by rights?"

"Get on," Mark snapped savagely, and apparently this time Little heard the suppressed anger in his voice. He wisely decided to abandon any attempt at light conversation. She heard the two of them move forward over the grass. Waiting until they had got a short start, she raised herself cautiously to a sitting position, gave a quick look round, and dropped to the ground.

Cold and cramp between them almost made her fall headlong. But the excitement of the chase was on her. In front, she could just make out the dark mass of a house, and it seemed to be their destination. At least she had to suppose so. Of the two men she was following she could see nothing. She started forward, increasing her pace. There they were. She could barely discern them as two moving shadows. The bulk of the house before them loomed larger and larger, and horribly forbidding. At one end a grotesquely shaped gable assumed to her fancy the

shape of a great monster waiting to swallow them. It was all she could do to go forward. She wanted to scream a warning to Mark and run; but somehow she forced herself to continue.

Feet gritted on a gravel path just ahead. She caught a low murmur of voices. A key clicked softly. She moved a little closer. Barely a dozen feet away, she saw a dark opening in the grey wall of the house. Then a door closed softly. They were inside. She was on the point of starting forward when she heard the key click again. She was locked out.

In her bitter disappointment she could have wept. Waiting outside, she might just as well never have come at all. Her only hope of finding anything out, or of helping Mark, was to follow them into the house, and the silence with which the door had opened had encouraged her to believe that that would be possible. Somehow she had to get in. She must force an entrance, even though she had no more efficient weapon than the nail-scissors in her handbag. It seemed utterly hopeless, but she set out grimly to investigate the possibilities.

Evidently it was not the front of the house which faced her. Mark and Little had entered by a small side door opening on a garden. She could just make out four big windows on the ground floor, two on each side, which might have offered possibilities for an expert. She tried one. Evidently they were locked, and likely to defy any effort she could make. More in a sheer dislike of being beaten than with any real hope of success, she set out on a circuit of the house.

In a few yards she reached the corner of the building. Beyond, the roofs of outhouses suggested that she had reached the back, and with a dim recollection that scullery and pantry windows were a popular method of approach for burglars she started to feel her way along the wall. But here things seemed worse than ever. Evidently it was

the side of the house most exposed to the weather, and most of the windows were not only locked but efficiently shuttered and some even barred. She had just passed the back door, after finding that it was immovable, when from straight ahead came a sudden streak of light.

It was the tiniest crack, and if she had not been so close she might easily have missed it. Certainly with the out-buildings to mask the windows the two men inside need have no fear that it would be noticed at any distance. Eagerly she crept forward, feeling every step over the rough flagstones of the yard.

She had hoped that it would be possible at least to look inside to see what was happening; but here again she was to be disappointed. The crack was near the hinges; it gave, not a straight view into the room, but a mere glimpse of the side of the window. Nevertheless, she peered through it, and with her ears alert for the least sound waited to see what might happen.

Once she fancied a shadow crossed the crack; but no sound reached her. Perhaps a couple of minutes had passed; though it seemed much longer. She grew desperate. She could not waste time there. Perhaps there was another window round the corner which would allow a better view. She started forward again, feeling her way towards the point where the wall ended. Then, as she reached it, she stopped dead with a stifled gasp. Something had moved in the darkness ahead of her.

A faint step sounded. Then, just visible, she made out a light moving patch, not a dozen feet away. Her heart was pounding violently. It seemed as though the stranger must hear it; and for an instant she thought that her presence had been noticed. The light patch vanished completely for a second or two. Then, against a window a little further along, came the faintest glow of light.

It was hardly strong enough for a torch, unless the torch had been carefully muffled in cloth. Slowly it moved up

the window. She fancied she caught a momentary glimpse of a face in profile, but it was gone almost as soon as seen. There was a gleam of steel; then a sharp snapping, and the shutter was flung back. The light went out. There was a scratching sound; and the noise of a window opening. The light patch appeared, and vanished. Whoever the stranger might be, he had gone inside.

For a moment she stood there uncertainly. There, if she dared to take it, was the way into the house. It all depended on what the unknown had done. Since he had forced an entrance, he could have no connexion with Mark. Then who was he? Hardly the police. More likely he was somehow connected with Little, and his arrival was a part of the trap which she felt more and more sure must have been set for him. That thought gave her courage. She noiselessly felt her way towards the window and peered inside, listening for the slightest sound. Everything was dark; everything was still. With a sudden desperate resolution, she swung herself up and through.

Just inside she stood for a full minute, trying to control the sudden trembling which had seized her. Even in the garden the gloom had been sufficiently terrifying; here there was the blackness of the pit, only the grey outline of the window through which she had come showing faintly behind her. With a start she realized that, standing where she was, she would be visible to anyone inside, though she could see nothing herself. Quickly moving to one side, she collided with something soft. She had almost screamed before she realized that it was nothing more dreadful than an easy chair.

With a great effort she pulled herself together. The room must be empty. The stranger had gone. Otherwise she would have been attacked already. There must be a way out somewhere. She started forward. Two steps across the room she found her way barred, by what investigation proved to be a large table. The place seemed full of

furniture; frighteningly full, for at any moment the noise of an accidental collision might lead to her discovery. With a desperate caution she groped her way to a wall, and began to feel her way round, acutely conscious of the time she was wasting.

Two walls proved blank. Half-way along the third her hands found an opening. There was the faintest suggestion of light. With only an instant's hesitation she stepped through; and then she realized that the time she had wasted in the room had proved her salvation. Windows at each end showed that she was in a long passage, apparently running the length of the house. For a second, against the far panes a dark shadow moved and passed. The man who had broken the window had actually been within a few yards of her.

Just within the doorway she waited, hoping for some other indication of the stranger's whereabouts. But the grey oblong at the end of the passage remained blank. She was still hesitating whether or not to risk going forward when she heard the sound of a doorhandle being turned. Simultaneously, a glow of yellow light lit up the corridor.

It came, not from a room, but from a second passage branching off to the left. She could see no one. Then there came a shout which was almost a scream.

"What——? Drop that! My God——!"

With a clutch at her heart she recognized Mark's voice. For a moment she stood petrified. Then, reckless of everything, she had started up the passage when there came the muffled sound of a shot.

"You—you've got me!" She did not recognize the voice. "Take that!"

There was a queer, animal-sounding scream of pain. Two more shots sounded before she had made as many paces. A door slammed; the light vanished, and footsteps were running down the passage towards her.

Instinctively she shrank back. The passage was wide,

but whoever it was passed so closely that he actually brushed against her. Then he was past, without having noticed her presence. She heard his deep, gasping breath. A shadow showed against the window beyond; a door closed; and all was silence.

For a moment she stood there stupidly. It was the thought of what might have happened to Mark which spurred her to desperate action. She ran along the passage. A gleam of light showed the opening on her left. It came from beneath a door. She found the handle, and flung it open. Then she stood staring at the tableau the lighted room revealed.

After the darkness of the passage it seemed ablaze with light; though the illumination consisted only of three candles stuck to the deal table. Evidently this was the kitchen. So much she took in even before she caught sight of Mark. He was standing near the wall, on which two fresh white scars showed vividly against the faded paper. In his hand he held a gun, pointing straight towards her, and on his face was an expression of horrified amazement. Bewildered recognition showed in his eyes as she stepped forward. The gun muzzle dropped.

"You—you——? What——?"

It was only then that she saw. Beside him lay the white-haired man; but now the hair was white no longer. From a wound just above his forehead the blood was oozing in a steady stream, and in his right hand he held a bloodstained knife.

"Mark!"

She ran across the room. Mark Henstone stood like one transfixed.

"What happened? Mark! What is it? Is he—is he——"

"I don't know," Mark said dully, and gazed at her uncomprehendingly. "I don't know——"

"Mark——"

"Someone opened the door," Mark went on after a

pause, in the same even voice. "He—he shot Little, but Little stabbed him . . . He fired at me . . . He ran out."

"The shots? You're hurt."

"No. He missed."

Still with the same controlled, impersonal calm, he pointed to the two bullet scars on the plaster behind him.

"But—but who?"

"I don't know. . . . I never saw him before."

"Why—why did you come?" Celia broke out despairingly. "With that man!"

Mark did not answer. He stood staring down at the floor.

"Don't you understand? The police—they tried to follow you. They're sure to follow. They'll find you. They'll think—they'll think that you did it——"

Mark's eyes met hers in a desperate appeal. "You—you don't think that?" he asked.

She advanced towards him, gripped the arm with the gun, and positively shook him.

"Mark . . . You've got to get away . . . Before you're found here. You can't explain . . . The gun—— Drop it!"

Obediently Mark relaxed his hold. The weapon fell with a thud on the floor, and the sound seemed to rouse him. He straightened himself, and his expression changed.

"But how did you get here?" he demanded. "Why—?"

"I followed you—meant to warn you . . . I stole a car and caught the train . . . I was in the dickey-seat . . . I'll tell you later. Mark, you must hurry. The candles . . . Someone might see——"

Mark stepped forward and one by one quenched the candles with his thumb. As the darkness engulfed them, she gripped his arm, guiding him down the passage. He stopped suddenly.

"The key——" He shivered. "He's got it . . . In his pocket."

"There's a window—along here. I came that way. I followed—followed the man who——"

She hurried him down the corridor towards the room at the far end. In the urgency of the moment, her terror had temporarily evaporated. Without a mistake she guided him to the window, helped by the cold night air which blew in upon them, and seemed to revive her.

Perhaps it had the same effect upon Mark. His voice was more normal as he spoke.

"You first," he said. "Quickly——"

In a moment he had joined her on the flags outside. He stood looking about him, apparently trying to get his bearings.

"Now—now the car——" Celia urged. She was still taking the lead, but her voice faltered. Now that she was actually out of the house, she felt curiously weak. A sudden horror flooded her mind. She wished only to get as far away from the place as possible; and from the dead man in that dreadful room.

"The car—the car——" she repeated wildly. "It—it's round here. We must find it. We've got to——"

She felt Mark's firm clasp on her arm, and his touch seemed to give her confidence.

"Quietly," he whispered. "Round the house . . . We'll be all right."

She stumbled forward obediently, following his guidance, but hardly aware of where they were going. The night seemed to be full of terrors. There were noises; not the ordinary noises of the night—but of people moving. It took all she could do merely to keep on her feet, and but for the arm which supported her she must have fallen.

"Not much further now," Mark encouraged.

They had rounded the corner of the house, crossed the gravel path, and now they were stumbling over the rough grass of the field. All at once from the right and a little

way ahead she heard something distinctly. She stopped, tugging at Mark's arm.

"There—there is someone," she said in a tense whisper. "Listen!"

They waited for a moment. Then Mark gently pulled her arm.

"It's nothing . . . Keep your nerve up——"

But Celia was beyond that. Whatever happened, she could not advance to what was waiting there in the darkness. She swayed a little. Everything seemed to be whirling round her.

"Wait—wait a minute——" she faltered almost inaudibly. "It—it's silly—but I'm going to faint——"

Abruptly in the darkness somewhere just beside them came the snapping of twigs. A low voice reached them.

"McCleod . . . ! McCleod . . . ! Where are you? I can't——"

There seemed to be something familiar in the tone, but Mark could not place it. However, there was no mistaking the savage whisper which answered.

"Quiet! Quiet, sir, for God's sake——"

Mark stood there helplessly. At the sound of the Inspector's voice Celia Vernon's hold on his arm loosened, and she collapsed limply. Mark was just in time to catch her as she fell.

CHAPTER XI

NIGHT ADVENTURES

THE local Inspector's strategy, sound enough in theory, suffered from all the hazards which have made greater generals distrustful of the method. McCleod, always dubious about the large-scale operation which had been

finally adopted, found his own party in difficulties almost as soon as they had left the car. No doubt the local constable had visited Broughton House weekly for the past few years; but his method of approach was to cycle up the drive, walk round with a glance at the windows, and depart again as he had come. With the exact positions of hedges, ditches, and the whereabouts of gaps and gates necessary to approach over the fields he was regrettably unfamiliar. Before they were half-way towards the house McCleod knew very well that they were playing the fool. He was acutely conscious that they were behind scheduled time and, instead of coming silently and unobtrusively, were approaching the place with the noise of a herd of elephants stampeding through the jungle. Ignorant that the Inspector had managed to involve himself in even more difficulties he found hope only in the fact that Mark Henstone could almost certainly be relied upon to play the fool.

From the point of view of a stealthy approach, Newley was a doubtful acquisition to the party. McCleod's idea had been that, if anything untoward happened and Newley had been with him continuously he would at least be certain that the manager had had no hand in it. But it soon became apparent that Newley was more at home in an office than when crawling through wet bushes at midnight; and he was easily the noisiest of the party. If the Inspector could have spared anyone to stay behind with him, he would gladly have left him; but having brought him so far, he could scarcely abandon his charge at the critical moment. Yet it was Newley who made the first discovery, and his method was characteristically noisy. McCleod, walking a few yards to his right, heard the sound of a muffled impact, and a regrettably audible exclamation.

"Damn!" And then, after a pause: "I say, Inspector . . . ! I say! It's a car!"

McCleod was at his side in a moment.

"Quiet, sir!" he begged. "That means that they're still here——"

His spirits revived a little. He did not dare to risk a light to examine his find; but he could at least cut off the means of retreat upon which his quarry relied, in case he failed to trap them. The local constable, without orders, had closed in at the sound of Newley's exclamation. Feeling the off front mudguard, he apparently recognized familiar scars.

"That's Jones's," he whispered. "From the pub. . . . Here . . . Feel where he hit the steam roller?"

"Jones's?" McCleod queried.

"They'd hire it to bring them from the station. . . . They must still be there."

That had been McCleod's own conclusion. He thought for a moment.

"Get Williams," he commanded. "Bring him here . . . Quick."

As the constable obediently set off on a game of blind man's buff which occupied several more valuable minutes, Newley apparently felt called upon to make a little light conversation.

"Why they?" he demanded. "Surely Mark set off alone?"

McCleod made no answer. Privately he had no doubt that somehow Celia Vernon had joined Mark Henstone; that both were in the house ahead, and that in all probability Little was with them. Anyhow, they would soon see. His silence seemed to discourage Newley. He ventured no more remarks until the constable returned, bringing not only Williams but Cary as well. McCleod sighed despondingly at the sight of them. It meant that the entire side of the house which they were supposed to be watching was left unguarded, except for the few feet visible from where they stood. He turned hastily to Williams.

"Sit down by that car . . . Grab anyone who comes and hold on to 'em. . . . And now, for Heaven's sake, let's get on. . . . The Inspector will be wondering what on earth——"

"He's bound to be there before us." The prospect seemed to be one to which Cary, at least, was resigned. "We must just look out to see no one bolts this way."

"Spread out, then. . . . Any more hedges?"

The constable pondered. On the whole he thought not. It should be clear going right to the house except for a few clumps of bushes. Resuming their extended line, the party set off again in the same order, Newley almost immediately finding one of the clumps of bushes.

McCleod himself had the place on the extreme left now. Unless he was mistaken, that was the path which was most likely to be taken by anyone trying to return to the car. He kept Newley next to him mainly because he did not know what else to do with him; then came the constable, with Cary on the extreme right. They could see the house now. McCleod swore under his breath. Newley was going well up to form, treading on everything that could conceivably make a noise. Then, finally, the manager thought that he had lost touch and called out. McCleod lost patience completely. He was just on the point of begging the man to wait behind when an unexpected noise down the drive made him turn sharply. It was the purring of a motor-cycle. Then, just beyond where the drive joined the road, a light flashed for a moment and receded rapidly towards the village.

With a sinking heart McCleod watched it. For the moment he could do nothing. It was a contingency against which the Inspector's plan completely failed to provide.

Incidentally, there was no sign of the Inspector. Perhaps he had tired of waiting and had entered the house alone. There was no sign of that wing of his party with which

McCleod should have made contact in order to complete the encirclement of the house. McCleod moved a little more to the left and quickened his pace, hoping that Cary was doing the same at the other end of the line. But they were level with the house, and still no sign of the other line. There was not a sound from ahead. That, of course, was as it should be. After all, he reflected bitterly, they had no Newley to contend with. Still, he was wondering what to do when at last a figure loomed unexpectedly before him.

"Who's that?" the Inspector's voice demanded. "Oh, is that you?"

"All right," McCleod assented. "Ready?"

"They should all be in position," said the Inspector without conviction. He came closer. "I say," he whispered, not without a note of triumph. "We've found their car. . . . I've left a man guarding it."

McCleod almost groaned. "So have we . . . So have I," he said. "And there was a motor-cycle, wasn't there? Almost needs a man on point duty!"

But the Inspector had not yet unburdened his mind. "I say, I suppose you didn't hear anything your side?" he demanded a little uneasily.

"When?"

"A few minutes before the motor-cycle. . . . I didn't hear anything myself—I was in the pond—but one of my men fancied he heard something——"

"What kind of thing?" McCleod demanded.

"Backfires—well, they might have been . . . Or—or shots?"

"Come on," McCleod urged fiercely. "Perhaps we're too late——"

A whistle shrilled suddenly. Round the corner of the house showed a glow of light. McCleod and the Inspector started forward almost together in the direction from which the sound came; then McCleod stopped. If he was any

judge, the Inspector's entire party had probably congregated in that section, and it was quite possible that Cary had joined them. But there were two cars. That meant that, once the alarm was given, someone might be expected to come in his direction. Instead of running forward, he dropped flat on the wet grass and lay still, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps and searching the vague skyline at intervals.

Something was certainly happening on the side of the house towards which the Inspector had run. It sounded like a free-for-all fight. McCleod was tempted, but held his ground. And then he had his reward. Against the dark grey of the sky to the right of the house he caught a movement of something blacker. Then a light step sounded on the gravel, and he was aware of feet rapidly approaching the place where he lay.

He could not guess who it was. Perhaps it was even a member of his own party returning; though it did not sound like any of them. All at once from further still to the right came the sound of a shout. Someone else was running in that direction, by no means silently. McCleod diagnosed Newley, and cursed below his breath, as he rose to his feet. Torches flashed wildly, and there was more shouting.

Then he realized that the hullabaloo and illuminations were actually doing him a service. The unknown had stopped at the first shout. Now he advanced again, and the noise on two sides was driving him straight towards where the Inspector stood. McCleod crouched down and waited.

What looked like a moving grey shadow emerged into the view soundlessly only a yard or two away. He wasted no time in challenging. It was unnecessary. None of his party wore light clothes. Instead, he sprang forward in a flying tackle, grabbed a pair of legs and fell with his captive.

"Got you," he grunted. "Keep still——"

His captive showed no signs of disobeying. In fact, the stillness was disquieting. McCleod had a momentary fear he might have broken the man's neck. He stretched out his hand, and found the head; then he uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Well!" he ejaculated inadequately, surprised even beyond more forcible comment. "Well!"

Footsteps were approaching. Newley crashed to a halt beside him.

"That you, Inspector?" he demanded. "I say, someone came this way . . . Oh . . . You got him . . . Who?"

McCleod sighed wearily. "I'm not sure," he said. "But I rather think I've just knocked out Miss Vernon. . . . Could you find the Inspector, sir? Or Mr. Cary?"

But the Inspector, apparently, was already in search of them. They heard his voice shouting.

"McCleod? Inspector McCleod!"

"Here!"

The Inspector was breathless with both haste and emotion as he halted beside them.

"My God, McCleod, it—it's murder!" he burst out. "There's one man lying shot there—dead. Perhaps another wounded. . . . One of our men found a window forced——"

"Who's dead?" McCleod demanded. "Not Henstone? A young man?"

"No. He's old—white-haired, anyhow."

"Little." McCleod frowned dubiously in the darkness. "Catch anyone?"

"No," the Inspector admitted. "But we're searching. It can only be a matter of time . . . Why, it must have happened in the past few minutes . . . You remember I mentioned the shots——"

"Show a light, will you?" McCleod interrupted a little irritably. "Down here . . . I stopped someone——"

The Inspector obeyed. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You've got him!"

"I've got someone," McCleod rejoined. "I don't know who. . . . Let's see her face——"

"Her——?" the Inspector echoed.

"Yes," McCleod said coolly; and then it was his turn to be surprised. "Heaven above!" he said. "It's Miss Bramley!"

CHAPTER XII

CAPTURED

CELIA VERNON regained consciousness lying on her back in the darkness and for a moment she could not imagine how she had got there. Overhead she idly distinguished the outlines of a tree; then she was vaguely aware of an arm supporting her head. All at once she remembered their flight from the house. She made a desperate effort to raise herself.

"Quiet, Celia," Mark's voice came urgently. "You're better? You're all right?"

She sat up. Her head still swam a little, but the faintness had gone.

"I'm all right," she declared. "It was idiotic of me to faint like that . . . What happened? Where are we?"

"In a clump of bushes near where you fell . . . As to what's happening, I don't know. We ran into a police cordon, or something. The whole place must have been surrounded. . . . As a matter of fact, I think it was your fainting that saved us. Since we weren't moving, somehow they didn't see us, and went right past . . . They've got to the house . . . I think ——"

"Then—then they'll find——!" Celia started unsteadily to her feet. "We must get away! they must

have missed the car . . . Probably they aren't watching——”

But Mark made no move to go. He stood there for a moment in silence.

“Probably they are,” he said quietly, and stopped. “In any case, I’ve been thinking . . . It was a mistake to run away at all. . . . The only thing for me to do is to give myself up and tell McCleod everything that happened.”

“But—but you can’t . . . They’ll think you must be guilty . . . They’ll never believe——”

“Listen a moment,” Mark interrupted. “Suppose that I don’t. Suppose I really did get clear of this place and back into the house without being spotted. Well, in any case, they know that I went out and dodged the watcher. . . . They’d ask me to explain where I’d been. How could I do that?”

Celia did not answer, and Mark went on. “They’re sure to find out that I’ve got some connexion with Little. I expect someone at the station saw us . . . They can probably find out where I booked to . . . Even in the house I must have left traces—fingerprints and so on——”

“The gun!” Celia exclaimed with a sudden horror. “You touched the gun! You were holding it when——!”

“Yes. I’d just grabbed it from the murderer. But my prints would be on it all right. . . . And they can’t possibly miss them, since they’ve already taken mine . . . I paid Little money—three five-pound notes. Those can be traced to me. . . . No, it’s no earthly use trying to pretend that I had nothing to do with it.”

“But—but they’re bound to think——” Celia began despairingly.

“They’re bound to suspect me. If I run, they’re bound to charge me, and perhaps even you, as an accomplice. . . . They’ll have missed you from the house. Could they trace you here?”

“I don’t know,” Celia said dully. “In any case, I

couldn't explain. . . . But, Mark, you wouldn't have a chance——"

"If I ran, I shouldn't. Because it would be practically hopeless for me to get away completely—probably the police all round are on the look out for me now. . . . But since, after all, I am innocent—really I am——"

"I know, Mark," Celia assured him. "But why—why did you come here? Why did you have anything to do with—with——?"

"With Little?" Mark supplied and paused for a moment. "Looking back it seems silly enough, but I'll tell you . . . Little came to the house last night——"

"The burglar?" Celia exclaimed.

"No . . . That was someone else. . . . That was the murderer."

"Who?"

"That's the real reason I'm here. Little knew who it was. He'd gone along the terrace and peeped in while the murderer was there. . . . But he wouldn't tell me. I'd hoped to get it out of him somehow. . . . But his actual reason was quite different. He wanted to get in touch with me because he said that he knew where to find an old will made by my uncle. He would show me, if I paid him. He said that he actually witnessed the will; but he wouldn't bring it to me. He made me come out here. . . . I suppose it was really a trap; but somehow he seemed to be telling the truth all right."

He was silent for a minute or two. "You see, it really looked as though it might be a way out," he said miserably. "If I produced a will which wasn't in my favour—and from what he said, it seemed practically certain that it wasn't—that would mean they couldn't find any motive for me. . . . And I still hoped to persuade Little to tell——"

Celia thought. "Why wouldn't he?" she asked.

"I believe he somehow hoped to blackmail both of us," Mark answered. "Or perhaps he was afraid——"

"Afraid?"

"He wouldn't say much, but that's what I thought. . . . So, in the end, I came along. When we got there, he took me to the kitchen, saying that the will was there. He went to the scullery and drew a bucket of water. Then he took out his knife. . . . It was just then the murderer came in——"

He broke off with a shudder. Celia was trying to work things out.

"But it makes it worse," she said hopelessly. "You'll have to admit you came to find a will. They'll say you meant to destroy it—and killed Little instead——"

"They may. . . . But there are quite a few points which may be in my favour. They may be able to trace the gun. And, somewhere there's a murderer with a knife-wound——"

"Mark, it's no good. . . . They'll never believe—Mark, you must come away——"

"Look!" Mark said.

Lights were gleaming in the house behind them, moving from room to room. It was plain enough that the police were searching, and as they looked, torches flashed round the corner of the house. Celia gripped Mark's arm.

"They'll find us. . . . Mark, you must come——"

"We'd do better to go and find McCleod," Mark said grimly. "Get it over."

"Mark, you mustn't!" Celia burst out hysterically. "Not yet. . . . I don't know what I'd say. . . . If we had a little time—to think things over—there must be some way. . . . I can't go back, Mark. . . . I can't face it——"

Mark hesitated. He was fully aware of the strain under which she was suffering, and guessed how great the ordeal of an examination by the police must be under the circumstances. In her present state of mind, she might only incriminate herself quite needlessly. He made up his mind.

"Very well. . . . We'll find the car—if the police haven't

got it already. Then I'll drive you home. . . . But when I get there, I'll ask the sergeant or whoever is there for McCleod, and tell him I have a statement to make. . . . That would give us a little time——”

In his heart, he knew as he spoke that it was the wrong thing to do. The odds were against their getting away at all; the fact that they had tried would certainly count against him. But Celia had already taken his arm and was leading the way across the field. Neither of them spoke as they moved off together in the darkness. Now that their flight had been resumed, they both seemed suddenly to have become aware again of the need for caution. Mark found himself wondering that they had not been discovered before. Probably the police had been too busy at the house to get very far in their search of the grounds. He shuddered a little as the picture recurred to his mind of Little's blood-stained head and the bullet-scarred wall. Again and again there recurred to his mind the hopeless question as to who the murderer could be.

The same question must have been running in the girl's mind.

“You—you saw the murderer?” she asked at last. “You would know him?”

“I saw him—in a way. . . . Not his face. He'd got a scarf wrapped round his head——” He sighed. “No, I don't know who it was. I don't believe I'd ever seen him before——”

“Even if you couldn't see his face—his figure, his clothes. . . . They didn't remind you of anyone?”

“No,” Mark said with decision. “He was wearing light-coloured riding-breeches and a dark coat. He was fairly slightly built——”

He broke off suddenly. Celia waited for him to go on, but he did not.

“But, Mark, think . . . It wasn't—it wasn't Carlton?”

“Francis? I'm fairly sure it wasn't. Nor Newley. Nor

any of the people the police seem to have had their eye on up to date. . . . It couldn't have been——” He was silent again, and when he spoke, it was to change the subject completely. “We must be pretty near the place now,” he said. “We'd better find the hedge——”

Evidently they had gone further to the left than they should have done. It was some little time before they struck it, and even then Mark hesitated, not knowing which way to turn to find the gate.

“We've come too far,” Celia suggested. “Up the hill a little. I'm almost sure——”

In fact, they had struck the place almost exactly. Only a few paces brought them to the gate and a yard or two further on a darker patch against the field resolved itself into the car. Celia suddenly gripped Mark's arm.

“Suppose—suppose they have found it?” she whispered. “Suppose they're watching. . . . Mark, let me go on——”

“No,” Mark answered quietly. “We'll go together.”

He led the way forward. Everything was quiet, and it seemed as though, beyond all probability, the police had somehow missed it. Mark had opened the door, and was actually helping the girl in when a beam of light suddenly stabbed the darkness and shone full upon them. He heard Celia's despairing gasp and turned, blinded by the sudden glare in his eyes.

“Just a moment, sir,” a voice said quite politely. The man with the torch came towards them a pace or two. “It's Mr. Mark Henstone, isn't it?”

“Yes,” Mark admitted.

“This your car, sir?”

“Well, it's one I hired,” Mark answered. “From the inn.”

“You came here in it, sir?”

“Yes.”

“With the young lady, sir?”

"With Miss Vernon? No." Mark answered, and then corrected himself. "That is, yes."

Apparently the detective did not think it worth while for him to inquire into this sudden change of mind.

"Well, sir, you're on enclosed premises," he said with even a certain diffidence, "and I'm afraid that there are reasons why I must ask you to see the Inspector, sir, before you go."

Mark stared. It only occurred to him after some seconds that the man on duty here must be in complete ignorance of what had happened at the house. It might be as well to enlighten him.

"As a matter of fact, I wanted to see the Inspector," he answered. "I have a statement to make to him. About the murder——"

"The murder?" Williams echoed the words. "Mr. Henstone's murder——"

"No. The murder of a man called Little at this house. I was a witness . . . But the young lady was not feeling well——"

"Murder at the house——!" Williams echoed helplessly, and if Mark had been in any mood to escape he could at that moment have laid the detective out without resistance. "You—you said murder, sir? And you saw it——?"

"Yes," Mark answered. "A man was shot——"

He was saved the trouble of trying to convince Williams. A voice sounded out of the darkness.

"Williams! Williams, you there? Who's that?"

Mark recognized the voice of Superintendent Cary. Before the detective had time to answer he had emerged into the light cast by the torch. Mark heard a muttered exclamation of what might have been either surprise or satisfaction. He decided to speak first.

"I wish to make a statement, Superintendent, about what has just occurred at the house. . . . I should tell you

that I was a witness to the actual murder of the man Little——”

“You were?” Cary asked, and there was a dubious note in his voice. “And, I suppose you realize that it may be used in evidence in court . . . And Miss Vernon? She saw the murder too?”

“No. She arrived immediately afterwards——”

“But I saw the murderer——” Celia intervened hastily. “And I heard——”

“Just a minute, miss,” Superintendent Cary said, and thought for a moment. “I think, sir,” he said at last, “you’d better both come up to the house.”

CHAPTER XIII

MCCLEOD SEES A LIGHT

INSPECTOR McCLEOD laid his pencil carefully by the side of his note-book on the dust-covered mahogany table and glanced from one of his companions to the other. Superintendent Cary wore an air of settled gloom which had been steadily deepening for the past half-hour; the expression on the local Inspector’s face was frankly one of contemptuous disbelief. McCleod himself smiled grimly, and spoke as the door closed behind Celia Vernon.

“Well?” he asked. “What d’you think of that?”

Superintendent Cary seemed in no hurry to answer. If anything his frown deepened. But the local Inspector burst out with obvious impatience.

“It’s just about the most idiotic, fantastic, complicated fairy-story that I’ve ever heard in my life!” he declared. “I don’t see that you’ve any choice but to charge Mark at once with the murder——”

"Which?" McCleod asked simply.

"Little's, obviously. . . . So far as Henstone's is concerned, you know better than I do, though I should have thought that it's perfectly obvious that the same person must have committed both—that is, in view of the evidence you've got against Mark Henstone. Still, that could wait. . . . The point is, there's everything you could wish to clinch it against him, except an eye-witness, and Miss Vernon was practically that. She saw him with the gun in his hand——"

"She also saw the murderer escaping," McCleod suggested.

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders. "Did she?" he asked. "I doubt it. Surely it's perfectly obvious whose side she's on. Surely it's quite evident that, while they were trying to get away it occurred to Mark that he wouldn't have a hope of escaping; that it was bound to be brought home to him; and then they concocted the 'mysterious stranger' stuff to try and get him off. . . . After all, he was trying to escape. . . . There's no earthly evidence that this man in the riding-breeches was here at all."

"The motor-cycle," Cary suggested.

Momentarily the Inspector was disconcerted, but he made a good recovery.

"Well," he said, "suppose there was a motor-cycle. Need it have had anything whatever to do with this case? All that we know is that it seems to have run up the lane and down again. In all probability it was just someone who lost his way, found he'd gone wrong, and went out again."

"In which case, it should be possible to persuade him to come forward."

"Not necessarily. . . . Some people wouldn't like to be mixed up in an affair of this kind at all. . . . Of course, it's not my responsibility. But I don't see how you can avoid an arrest, if I may say so."

McCleod turned to Cary. "And you?" he asked. "What did you make of them?"

The Superintendent sighed heavily. "I don't know," he said. "I admit that it's a highly improbable story. . . . And there's certainly a good deal of evidence against Mark. . . . And this time there aren't the complications that prevented us from charging him with Henstone's murder——"

"Miss Bramley," McCleod murmured.

The Superintendent made a hopeless gesture. "We don't know what she'll say yet," he answered. "That's the worst of her. Whenever you want her as a witness she seems to get laid up."

"I'm afraid I'm partly responsible for that," McCleod apologized. "But the point is, Superintendent, do you think that Mark and Miss Vernon made all this stuff up or not?"

For a moment Cary did not answer. Then he banged the table with an emphatic fist which raised a little halo of dust around the candles.

"No!" he said, almost violently. "I'm damned if I do . . . ! My private opinion is that this time they're both telling the literal unvarnished truth so far as they possibly can. . . . If we have to hang Mark for that, I'll retire from the force."

He glared at McCleod almost as if the Scotland Yard man was personally responsible for what had happened, and nodded his head emphatically.

"I mean that," he said. "If Mark hangs——"

Something like a subdued laugh escaped McCleod, but there was relief in his face.

"I suppose you've got some reasons for believing it?" he asked.

"Well, I have," Cary said doggedly. "And the first is that, improbable as it sounded, I never heard a more straightforward piece of evidence than Mark gave. . . . And we all questioned him, trying to catch him out. . . . You didn't manage it yourself, Inspector."

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, he'd worked up his tale all right, and he got it off pat," he admitted.

"Well, he hadn't had very long to work it up in," Cary countered. "And he gave away all kinds of things that he needn't have done. For example, the gun. The butt was too rough to show any prints. We couldn't have proved he touched it. . . . Then he's not wounded——"

"That might have been Little's own blood," the Inspector broke in sourly.

"Anyhow, we couldn't find any reason why his story shouldn't be true. . . . But it was the girl who convinced me. I admit she was on Mark's side. But the point is, she was thoroughly done up, and nearly collapsing by the time she'd done. I don't believe anyone in that state could have kept to a coherent lie as complicated as that."

McCleod smiled and nodded his agreement. "That's exactly what I think myself, Superintendent," he said. "But I see the Inspector's point. And it seems to me that we are going to have real trouble in avoiding any arrest of Mark, with Celia Vernon as accessory. In other words, we've got to get very busy indeed, and the sooner Miss Bramley speaks the better. . . . The doctor's with her now. We'll see what he says. . . . In the meantime, let's just consider some of the points we've got to check which may confirm Mark's story. . . . First, there's the blood on the knife——"

"You can't tell one person's blood from another," the Inspector snapped.

"You can't always tell one person's blood from another," McCleod corrected. "On the other hand, it might be possible. Suppose the blood on the knife belonged to a group which wasn't Little's; or Mark's; or Celia Vernon's. It's very fresh. Whose was it?"

Cary nodded almost hopefully. "There's the gun," he said. "We ought to be able to trace its history?"

"No," said the Inspector positively, "that's a German gun—almost certainly a war relic that's never been bought or sold, registered or licensed. Piles about like that."

"Unfortunately, that's probably true. . . . But Mark wasn't in the army, so he must have got it from someone. . . . There's the motor-cycle. We might trace that from the tyre impressions. And I've another possibility—though goodness knows how long it will take to work up. . . . While we're waiting, I'd like to have another look at things in there."

He led the way into the kitchen. The body of the dead man had been covered with a table-cloth; otherwise nothing seemed to have been moved, except that on a side table the contents of the dead man's pockets had been laid out methodically. McCleod moved over to the wall which the bullets had marked and seemed to be examining the holes carefully. Then he glanced down at the bucket of water and looked at Cary.

"Suppose the story of the will is true," he said, "and suppose it's hidden somewhere here. Where do you suppose it is, and what did he want the water for?"

Cary shook his head, and cast a speculative glance round the room. In spite of its neglected appearance, it was not an old building. Indeed, the peculiarity of the house was that it had been both built and abandoned by its first and only tenant. It was not in the least likely that there would be any secret recesses, concealed passages, or anything of the kind; indeed, it would have been impossible to construct any. The floor of the room was solid cement; the roof, though festooned with cobwebs and spotted with damp, an equally unbroken expanse of plaster. Even the paper on the walls was almost without a mark. Short of the stove, the scanty furniture and two or three built-in cupboards, there seemed to be nowhere which offered any opportunities for concealing even so small an object as a will.

"What did he want the water for?" Cary asked, speaking more to himself than anyone else. "If there were flagstones, it might be used to find a hollow underneath——"

The local Inspector, having finished a fruitless examination of the two cupboards on either side of the bullet-marked wall, joined McCleod, who was standing by the table which held the dead man's few possessions. There was nothing very remarkable about them, except for the incongruous presence of three new £5 notes, and the brand-new tool which McCleod had just picked up.

"I suppose this is the chisel?" he said thoughtfully.

His colleague eyed it dubiously. A polished wooden handle held a flat piece of metal about six inches long, going broader towards the end. Obviously it was neither strong enough nor sharp enough to cut anything much tougher than cheese. He shook his head.

"That's a plasterer's tool," he declared. "You can't smooth off the stuff with the flat edge. It wouldn't cut anything. It wouldn't be strong enough even for a lever——"

Cary joined them. "You think the will's actually in the cement or plaster?" he said.

"I don't think there's a will at all," the other rejoined. "I think that's a trumped-up tale."

"But Henstone, when he was dying——"

"Said something which might have referred to Little. That was used as a reason to get him here."

Cary could not accept that. "It seems to me rather as though Mark was the person who was enticed here," he said. "And though 'old Will' might have referred to Little, I don't see why he had to drag in the house. . . . But if the will really is here, so far as I can see it means taking the place to pieces."

"Which we can hardly do without the owner's permission," McCleod pointed out. "Personally, I think there is a will here. . . . And I don't think we shall really have

much trouble in finding it. The indications are pretty plain——”

He broke off as the door opened and the police surgeon entered. Obviously he had been dragged from his bed; for he wore a coat and trousers over his pyjamas with a scarf at his throat. Equally obviously he was anxious to return to bed, and his manner was distinctly brisk and irritable.

“You can see her now,” he snapped. “No concussion, so far as I can make out. . . . For the Lord’s sake don’t bother her more than you must—otherwise you’ll probably have a case of hysterics on your hands. . . . If you want to question lady witnesses in the small hours you oughtn’t to knock them out first!”

“We’ll be as gentle as—as anything,” McCleod promised. “By the way—you examined her, doctor?”

“Yes. She’s not wounded anywhere, except the bruise on the head you gave her. . . . I’m leaving the nurse here. The other girl’s all right, except she’ll probably get a chill. . . . Don’t send for me unless she throws a fit——”

“Nothing fresh about——?” McCleod nodded at the table-cloth-covered heap.

“Nothing. Shot at about arm’s length. Must have died inside a minute or two. We’ll get the bullet later, but judging by the hole, that’s the gun all right. . . . You’ll get it moved? All right. Good night.”

He turned quickly and the door had closed behind him before anyone could find any further question. McCleod raised his eyebrows.

“I wonder if policemen are as heartless as doctors,” he murmured. “Perhaps the medical profession needs its beauty sleep more. Well——”

He stood thinking for a moment. Then he looked at Cary. “One thing you might put them on to in the morning,” he said. “I’d like to know all I can about the trades and professions of all the people concerned. . . .

What they've done all through their lives, and, if possible where . . . Also I'd like, as a precautionary measure, to know all about the house. Get the builder, architect and so on. Make sure there's no hiding place in the actual structure——"

"All their trades——?" Cary repeated. "I don't quite get you. Most of them——"

"Well, the idea is this. I believe more and more that the reason for Henstone's murder had nothing to do with this silly business of his with Mark and Carlton. That is, that may have precipitated things, but I believe the real trouble starts earlier. Somewhere back in that time when Henstone was buzzing about as tinker, tailor, soldier etc.——"

"Tinker?" queried Cary. "Oh, I see. . . . What you're really after is some possible associate locally?"

"Or not locally . . . And perhaps two people."

"That's going to be a job . . . We'll try it . . . And now—Miss Bramley?"

McCleod nodded assent and led the way up the passage to the drawing-room which had temporarily been converted into a sick-room. If the police had been responsible for knocking Kathleen Bramley out, they had done their best to make amends. With the help of car-rugs and pillows she was fairly comfortably settled, and though she looked pale she showed no other ill effects from her fall except a slight bruise on her forehead, almost concealed by her hair. But the expression in her eyes as she looked up on their entrance showed that the doctor's warning about hysteria was justified. McCleod caught the question in the uniformed nurse's look and shook his head.

"I think you'd better stay, nurse—if Miss Bramley doesn't mind," he said. "I'm sure we can rely on your discretion——"

"I don't mind——" Kathleen Bramley said dully. "I'd prefer it."

McCleod seated himself on a chair near the head of the couch, and his manner was positively bedside.

"Well, Miss Bramley," he said cheerfully. "We were out hunting to-night, but we never expected to catch you . . . ! I'm glad you're not hurt. . . . One of our men—" he met Cary's eye stonily and continued—"one of our men mistook you for a burglar. You see, we had heard——"

"Then—then it was a trap! It was meant that I should be caught here?"

She raised herself a little erect; then sank back.

"Probably it was," McCleod admitted. "But, of course, we haven't heard your story yet . . . Now, if you'd just lie quietly, and tell us about it . . . How did you come to be here so late?"

"I—it was a letter," she frowned painfully with the effort of piecing her thoughts together. "I got it this morning. It said that Mr. Henstone had made a will, but that an attempt would be made by Mark to destroy it. There was a plan, and directions for getting here——"

"You've got it——?"

"Not here . . . Not the letter. The plan—in my coat pocket——"

McCleod extracted a single sheet of paper and unfolded it. Cary and the other Inspector glanced over his shoulder. It was a sketch map, neatly executed and perfectly clear, of the approach to the house from the village, with all the necessary details for getting there, including a cross with the words neatly printed "Park Car Here". Another cross, at one side of the house, was marked "Window", and, as he identified it, Cary pursed his lips into a silent whistle. It was the window through which an entry had actually been forced that night.

"This was sent anonymously?" McCleod asked.

"Yes . . . It said that I must actually catch Mark in the act, as only he would know where the actual hiding place

of the will was. . . . It told me to come alone and that a friend would be there to help me——”

“A friend?” McCleod echoed. “Had you any idea who that could be?”

“No. . . . It said I should get news later on when I must go. . . . A message was dropped into the letter box this evening. It simply said ‘Mark leaves at nine to-night’. That was all.”

“Dropped into the box?”

“Yes, it hadn’t been posted. . . . We didn’t see who left it.”

“And you kept that too?”

“Yes . . . But they were printed. . . . You couldn’t tell the writing——”

McCleod inclined his head in assent. “We should like them, though,” he said. Actually it was a public delusion, he believed, that one could abolish the character of handwriting merely by printing the letters; though it made things more difficult. “So you set out,” he said. “By car?”

“Yes. I’d already looked up the route. . . . But I had some trouble and lost my way.”

“And so you were late in arriving here,” McCleod said almost to himself.

“I suppose I was. I put the car where I had been told, but there was no one here. I went up the lane to the house . . . I didn’t see anyone, but I thought I heard people moving. I was horribly frightened. . . . Then, just as I got to the house, there was a lot of shouting and lights . . . I—I rather lost my nerve, and I ran. I didn’t really know where I was going. Then someone tripped me or something . . . I didn’t know any more until I found myself here.”

“Then you never entered the house at all?”

“No. . . . When I got here I didn’t know what to do next. I waited in front. . . . I daren’t have gone in alone. . . . I was awfully frightened——”

Plainly she would not be able to answer many more questions. McCleod thought for a moment.

"I don't know how you ever managed to screw up your courage to coming at all," he said with a certain admiration. "I suppose——"

"It was—Francis. . . . I hoped—something would happen——"

"To clear him? Perhaps it has. . . . You didn't see another car? Or a motor-cycle?"

"No. I didn't see anyone. . . . I believe I heard a motor-cycle."

"You'd no idea who could have sent the letter?"

"No. . . ."

"Where was it posted?"

"I—I didn't notice. . . . I'm afraid I didn't keep it—the envelope." Her eyes closed for a moment; then she looked up suddenly. "You said—perhaps something had happened to clear—to clear Francis——?"

"Perhaps," McCleod answered. "In fact, I've every hope Mr. Carlton will be released. In spite of his confession. . . . Of course, we understand he might have made that to clear you. . . . I think that's all, Miss Bramley. . . . They're sending a car or an ambulance soon. Perhaps you'll feel better if we call on you to-morrow."

Outside the room, Cary eyed him accusingly. "You're rather a hypocrite," he said. "Encouraging her like that—when, for all you know she's a murderess."

"I don't believe for a moment that she is."

"I notice you didn't confess to your assault and battery."

"No. . . . On the whole, I believe a knock on the head does that girl good. She made a much better witness this time—except that she'd nothing to tell us! And now——Hullo! What's up now?"

Obviously there was some kind of an altercation proceeding at the front door. The man on duty there was politely but firmly obstructing the passage of someone

who was evidently determined to enter. Cary caught a few words, recognized the voice, and his jaw dropped.

"Good Lord!" he murmured. "It's old Bembridge! Now, what the devil——?"

"And how the devil——?" McCleod supplemented softly. "It looks as though someone's been trying to get the full collection at Broughton House. . . . But who?" He thought for a minute. "Look here, we shall have to handle this pretty carefully. . . . There's something very queer about this——"

"Damn it, I don't need to be told that!" Cary snapped. "But why, particularly now——?"

"Because it's the presence of Bembridge which is particularly queer—almost queerer than all the rest . . . Why is he here? Presumably he'll tell us——"

"To protect the interests of his client Mark!" Cary said ironically.

"But, how on earth did he know that his client Mark was going to get into further difficulties at this time of night in a place miles away? No one's left the place. No one could have phoned—there's no phone. No one could have sent a message——"

Cary remembered something. "There was that motorcycle," he said. "Whoever left then could have told him. Always assuming that it really came from the house."

"In which case, we've got the situation of the real murderer getting legal assistance for the man who might be charged instead of him. . . . But there might be another reason altogether."

"What?"

"Suppose Bembridge was the murderer of Henstone," McCleod said, as though he was speaking to himself. "Of course, he could be. There might be a motive somewhere in his legal business with Henstone. It might even be affection for Mark. . . . He would know about the medicine. He could have got in through the window——"

"But what's that got to do with to-night?" Cary demanded.

"Suppose he was the murderer to-night. . . . He might think that we'd ask for alibis from all those in any way connected with the death of Henstone. He would have spent a certain amount of time getting here for which he had to account and couldn't. He might even know that someone could identify him as having been in the neighbourhood. His safest course might be to admit he was here—and find a good reason for coming."

The solicitor's voice sounded eloquently up the passage.

"He seems natural enough," Cary commented.

McClod nodded. "We'll see," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

MOSTLY LEGAL

WITH quite a welcoming smile the Inspector ushered Mr. Bembridge into the dusty dining-room which was their temporary headquarters. He relieved him of his soaking raincoat, gave him a chair, and offered a cigarette, which was stiffly refused. Then he seated himself, and sat eyeing the little lawyer quizzically; while Cary and the local Inspector stood unhappily in the background like two suspicious and dissatisfied ghosts.

"Well, sir, it's quite a surprise seeing you here!" he said cheerfully. "That almost makes the quorum complete. . . . How did you know where to find us, if I may ask, sir."

Mr. Bembridge adjusted his glasses and looked at him sternly.

"I came, Inspector," he said with dignity, "I came, at

some personal inconvenience, to safeguard the interests of my client, Mr. Mark Henstone——”

“I see, sir,” McCleod assented readily. “By the way, sir, is Miss Bramley a client of yours? Or Mr. Newley?”

“They are not,” said Mr. Bembridge coldly. “Mr. Mark Henstone has asked me to look into the arrest of his cousin, Mr. Carlton. . . . I have never been engaged for Mr. Newley. . . . Why do you ask?”

“I thought you might like to see them,” McCleod said amiably. “But I still don’t quite understand, sir. No doubt your presence here is very proper—in fact, I suggested to Mr. Mark a little while ago before I interviewed him that he might prefer to be represented by his solicitor—that is, to answer in his presence . . . He preferred to make a statement without.”

“Ah . . . He has made a statement?” Mr. Bembridge said, a little vaguely. “A pity——”

“His willingness to do so, sir, will be in his favour. But I still don’t quite understand how you knew where to find us.”

“I was informed,” Bembridge said portentously. “I received a telephone message to the effect that Mr. Mark Henstone had come here with a view to discovering a will made by the late Mr. James Henstone. . . . I considered it my duty to be present.”

“You received a telephone call, sir?” McCleod echoed. “From whom?”

Bembridge hesitated. “Just at the moment,” he said. “I should prefer not to answer that question . . . Is it true that the will has been found?”

“It has not been found,” McCleod answered, paused, and then added: “Yet.”

“You mean that you believe it will be?” Bembridge bristled. “But I assure you, the late Mr. Henstone told me most categorically that there was no will; that——”

“Possibly,” said McCleod, “he had forgotten about

it. . . . Or, possibly, he doubted its validity. . . . Perhaps you could tell me, sir. I will put a case to you, for the sake of example. . . . You will understand, of course, that it has not necessarily anything to do with the late Mr. Henstone. . . . Let us suppose, sir, that you and I were having an argument about making a will. Suppose that I said that I could draw up a will and that you expressed your doubts on the matter. Suppose I did draw up a will, leaving all I had to the—to the Assistant Commissioner, and that it was properly signed, dated and witnessed. Suppose, by some oversight, the will was preserved, and, when I died, apparently intestate, was produced by the Assistant Commissioner. Would Probate be granted on it, and would he benefit under it?"

Mr. Bembridge hesitated. "Undoubtedly in cases of obscurity the law is sometimes interpreted so as to attempt to carry out the real wishes of the testator," he said with some hesitation. "But I must say, assuming that the will was properly drawn up, it might be difficult to upset it."

"Let us further suppose," McCleod continued, "that the actual witnesses to the fact that it was a joke were dead . . . Let us suppose that, when I was dying, I uttered a few words which might be interpreted as meaning that I wished it to stand——"

"What——?" Mr. Bembridge said incredulously. "You mean——?" He broke off. "I should say that there would be no chance of upsetting it whatever," he said with more than a trace of gloom.

"But, in all probability there is a further complication," McCleod pursued. "At the time, it happened that I was short of paper. . . . Instead of drawing it up in a regular manner in ink, I scribbled it in indelible pencil on the sole of my boot. . . . Would that be legal?"

"Possibly," Mr. Bembridge said after some thought. "There have been instances of wills drawn up upon unusual substances. In one case, I believe, a will was written

on a house door. . . . In that case, however, the court refused to accept photographs. It was necessary for the actual door to be admitted to probate. . . . Then—then you believe——?”

“I believe that something of the kind may have occurred in the case of Mr. Henstone? Yes. I am inclined to think it has.”

“But you have not yet found the will?”

“Not yet,” McCleod agreed. “But I am not without hope of doing so.”

Mr. Bembridge frowned. “The will, I take it, would be a holograph?” he asked. “I mean, supposing that you had not enough room on one boot, and used the other——”

“I do not think that will arise.”

There was a curious expression on McCleod’s face which puzzled Cary. Obviously he knew what he was talking about, but the Superintendent could not guess just how he had come to the knowledge. Bembridge was visibly perturbed.

“Possibly you have some idea who are the beneficiaries under the will?”

“At present, no. . . . Possibly in a day or two. . . . But I think I can assure that Mr. Mark Henstone is not one of them.”

Bembridge frowned. “This—this is very serious,” he said. “It was in connexion with this that Mr. Mark Henstone made his statement?”

“In part,” McCleod said without changing his tone or expression, “principally, however, it was as a witness to the murder of a man called Little here to-night——”

“Murder——!” Bembridge echoed in stupefaction. “Good—good——!”

If he were the murderer, Cary thought, he must be a superb actor.

“The dead man came here in company with Mr. Mark Henstone to look for the will. . . . According to Mr. Mark

Henstone's statement which is only partially confirmed by other evidence. He was shot by a stranger whose face Mr. Henstone did not see. . . . But perhaps you would like to hear his account for yourself?"

"I—I must see him at once," Bembridge said anxiously. "You—you've not charged him—with—with this?"

"Not at present. . . . I hope, however, sir, that you will impress upon him the necessity of acting discreetly, and of co-operating with the police in remaining available——"

He beckoned to the sergeant, who ushered the solicitor from the room. Cary waited only until the door closed before he burst out into a torrent of questions.

"But—look here——! How do you know about this will . . . ? Where is it? How do you know who——?"

McCleod smiled, with a faint shrug of his shoulders.

"It's guesswork, to some extent," he said. "But there's evidence for it—and you've seen it yourself. . . . What's more, I believe it's evidence which will lead us to Henstone's murderer. To-morrow may decide——" He stopped. "But I'd rather not say anything just yet, until things are a little more clear."

The local Inspector had been viewing the whole proceeding with a mixture of wonder and disapproval.

"Then you're not arresting Mark Henstone?" he demanded.

"I don't think we'd better arrest anyone. . . . Personally, I believe Mark's statement—though of course we must test it in every possible way. I believe the girl—idiotic though her conduct seems to have been. Miss Bramley——"

"Aren't you treating her rather casually?" Cary asked. "After all, she's one of the most likely candidates for killing Henstone. Her conduct's been thoroughly suspicious throughout. Her story to-night is completely unconfirmed. . . . And Mark's description of the way the murderer was dressed——"

"Corresponds roughly to Miss Bramley's costume? Yes. That's an interesting point. . . . Though, you notice, Mark's description wasn't at all exact. He said grey riding-breeches and a black or dark blue coat. Hers were fawn, and the coat dark brown. And she was wearing a mackintosh——"

"Which she'd naturally take off to get through the window."

"Perhaps . . . But the point is, there's not the least reason logically why she should kill Little . . . As things stand, until this other will's discovered, Francis Carlton can't benefit. Mark becomes sole heir—because though everyone speaks of Francis as a cousin, he's really only an obscure connexion by marriage. . . . Why should she kill Little when he was on the point of finding a will?"

Cary grunted. "Lost her head. She's liable to that."

"Perhaps . . . Then, she's not wounded. . . . Mark saw the murderer stabbed, and there's blood on Little's knife."

"Mark might shield her."

"But in that case he must have invented the stabbing before he knew she was here at all. . . . In fact, he doesn't know even now, unless one of the police has told him. . . . We'll see what her document is like to-morrow—but I don't believe for a moment she forged this plan."

"Why not?"

"Look at it," McCleod suggested, and spread it out.

"What do you notice about it?"

"It's a pretty neat piece of work——"

"More than that—it's positively professional. I mean, look at that printing. I'll take my oath that whoever did that had had some training—either in a drawing office or somewhere else. Besides, if she didn't hear this way, how did she know at all?"

"How did the murderer know?"

"I've an idea about that. It depends on the general badness of Little's character—and that's one thing we

must find out somehow. Not that it may be easy—with a tramp like that.”

There was a moment's silence. Cary had filled his pipe, lit it and puffed furiously for a moment, frowning fiercely at the plan. At last he spoke.

“Look here, things seem to be worse than ever,” he said at last. “For Henstone's murder, we had a certain number of possibles. First, Mark. You seem to have decided he's innocent. Then Francis Carlton. He's in gaol, so that he can't have done this. Miss Bramley—she could have done both. . . . There's even evidence that she did. Newley. Well, we know he didn't do this one—for I suppose it's quite impossible he slipped on ahead as we were coming up?”

“Quite.”

“Little might have killed Henstone, but he didn't kill himself. Higson's nowhere near the place . . . There's no one left of the original suspects.”

“Bembridge and Dr. Wilton,” McCleod suggested.

“Who?”

“Bembridge had a good deal of the necessary knowledge. We haven't found a motive yet—it might be connected with the estate. He could have come rather earlier, and got in through the french window. His appearance on the scene to-night is distinctly suspicious—and he won't say how he knew.”

“But—but—— Anyhow, Wilton's surely out of it.”

“No. On the contrary, so far as Henstone's death is concerned, he's the ideal person to be the murderer. I confess his motive isn't obvious—but then, I think we shall find the real motive in this is fairly obscured. Otherwise, just look at it coldly. He changes the medicine the day before. He knows when it's going to be taken and how. He knows who generally administers it. When he's called to the scene of the death, he takes possession of the bottles until the police arrive. . . . Isn't it obvious?”

"What?"

"That the linament might not have been used at all. That the belladonna might have been in the medicine Mark gave to his uncle. That, after the murder, in some odd minute or two when he wasn't being watched, he simply emptied one lot of medicine out and substituted the right one!"

"I'm only saying it's possible——"

"And, by George, Wilton was alone in the room when we got there!" Cary said thoughtfully. "He'd turfed everyone else out!"

"There you are. . . . Of course, we've no evidence that he's been here to-night—but we've no alibi, as we have for Newley and Higson. And if he gets back unseen, he'll be able to say as the others did last night. 'I was asleep in bed.' And then . . . Hullo! What's this? More trouble?"

A uniformed motor-cyclist constable had entered, still dripping from the drizzle outside, and the sergeant who followed him in hurried forward with an explanation.

"Message from Henstone's house, sir . . . They thought they'd better let you know at once, and they couldn't get you on the phone."

"Well?" McCleod demanded.

"Telephone message from the house, phoned through to the local station, sir," the motor-cyclist said. "It came about twenty minutes ago. . . . The butler, John Higson, has been found lying underneath his bedroom window, sir, with a damaged leg. Apparently a length of fall-piping had come away while he was trying to climb it. Detective Constable Miles heard the crash, went out, and found him. So far he has made no statement as to how it occurred."

"Well——!" Cary said helplessly. "What do you know about that?"

CHAPTER XV

A PROMISE AND A WARNING

It was with a curious feeling of embarrassment that Mark Henstone faced Celia in the office next morning. After the events of the night before, it came as a distinct shock to him to see her sitting at the desk exactly as if nothing had happened, and sorting papers as though it was the one thing which really interested her in life. Of the alarms and excursions at Broughton House she showed no trace; less, in fact, than Mark himself, under whose eyes dark lines showed another sleepless night. She rose with a smile as he entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Henstone," she said briskly. "You wanted me?"

Mark closed the door. He did not know exactly how to begin, and her greeting had somehow spoilt such conversational openings as he had mentally rehearsed. He stood looking at her for half a minute. Though a slight flush came into her cheeks, her level eyes met his without a waver.

"I came to thank you——" he began, and gave that up. "It was Mark last night," he said after a long pause.

"And it was Broughton House last night, Mr. Henstone." There was the trace of a smile upon her lips, but a firmness about her mouth showed that she was very serious. "And we were both engaged in activities of dubious legality. . . . Perhaps that demoralized us. But to-day, this is my office, and you are my employer——"

Mark seated himself on the edge of the table and swung one leg to and fro, frowning at the floor. The interview was going to be more difficult even than he had thought. All at once he grinned, and looked up suddenly enough to surprise an unsecretarial expression of sympathy upon Celia's face.

"I'm not at all sure I am!" he said triumphantly. "So I don't think that need worry us. . . . You see, in the first place, I suppose your employment terminated with my uncle's death, and you can only demand the usual notice from the executors. One doesn't inherit a secretary. . . . In the second place, it's far from certain if I am the heir or not—and if I'm not, I certainly can't afford a secretary. . . . In the third place, a criminal is not allowed to benefit by a felony, and since I may be arrested at any moment——"

"Don't," she pleaded in quite a different voice. Her face was suddenly troubled. "Don't joke about that, please, Mar——" She broke off, and her colour deepened. "I am sure that it will come out all right——"

"I hope to God it does," Mark said, and then with an effort returned to his former manner. "But, if it does, Celia, I don't want you to continue here—as secretary. . . . I've every intention of going on calling you Celia, and with your obviously strict views on business etiquette——" He stopped, suddenly serious. "Celia, will you—will you marry me?"

"Mark," she said, and faced him with something like defiance in her eyes. "I think we'd better understand each other. . . . Last night—well, it was last night. We were neither of us very normal. . . . You were grateful to me because I tried to help you—though I didn't actually do any good, and only hindered you from doing the right thing immediately——"

"Actually, you did help me." There was a trace of bitterness in his voice. "You were a witness to the fact that the murderer was not entirely a figment of my imagination. I don't know whether they believe me or not, but I'm sure that, if you hadn't been there, I shouldn't have had a dog's chance of avoiding arrest. But for you——"

"Mark, that makes no difference," she broke in. "The point is that the situation wasn't normal. We were both

excited. It's no use building on what happened then. . . . People often think they're in love with each other when the circumstances are unusual. Afterwards they wonder how they could ever have been such fools."

"I suppose you've had some experience of fools," Mark said jealously.

"If I have, that's my own business. . . . At any rate, Mark, I've seen too many people made miserable through plunging into unsuitable marriages to let you do it."

Mark was silent for quite a long time. His hands were clasped round his knee, and he sat staring at the carpet.

"I suppose you're perfectly right," he said slowly. "The position isn't normal. Not only last night, but now. . . . The fact is that, as things are with me no one but a cad would propose as I've just done. . . . You're quite right to tell me so."

"A cad?" Celia echoed the words in obvious bewilderment. "But, Mark! I never thought——"

"Something very like it. Look here, McCleod and Cary may be going slow—they may even be trying to believe me. In any case they know I can't get away. Look at last night. . . . But there's no denying the fact that I'm the most likely person to have committed not only one murder, but two. . . . I ought never to have mentioned it while there was even a suspicion hanging over me——"

"But—but, Mark, you didn't do it——"

There was real distress in her voice, but Mark did not look up. He went on, speaking in a dull, even tone which was more painful to his hearer than any amount of emotion, and his face, which had been almost boyish, had slipped back into its old mask-like expression.

"Until the murderer is found, I'm bound to be suspected. It's not enough that they shouldn't charge me. I'd sooner take my chance of acquittal. People will think——"

"But, Mark—I don't think so. . . . You know I don't." She placed a hand on his arm. Still he refused to look up. "No one who matters does. Even McCleod and the police——"

"I know. . . . I've heard people talk about things like that before. 'He was lucky to get off, wasn't he? Conflict of evidence, no doubt—jury couldn't agree. . . . But, of course there's no real doubt——' How would you like to be the wife of a man whose neighbours talked like that? And I was asking you to marry me—with *that* hanging over my head!"

"Mark!" Celia shook his arm fiercely. He looked up at her, but without changing his expression. There were tears in her eyes, and her lips trembled a little. "Mark, you don't think that that's why I refused you?"

His face softened. He looked at her for quite a long time before he spoke.

"No, Celia, I don't," he said slowly. "But it is one reason why I shouldn't have asked you yet. "He paused for a moment, then hurried on as he saw she was on the point of speaking. "There's another. . . . You don't know a lot about me, do you?"

Celia smiled through her tears. "More—more, perhaps, than you think, Mark," she said softly.

"But I mean, about my life, and the way I've been brought up here. 'The fact is that through the best years of my life, I've simply been dancing attendance on an invalid. I was never properly educated. I've not been learning how to do anything useful. I've not been earning my living. . . . At the present time, I'm not fitted to earn a decent living at anything. . . . My uncle's idea might have been that I was going to have his money and didn't need a profession. I used to think it was. . . . But lately, I've known—I know now, that he meant to leave me stranded—that he meant me to be helpless, just because he hated my mother. . . . And he's succeeded."

Celia said nothing, not knowing how to console him; only her clasp on his arm tightened a little.

"You see, the one thing I learnt from Little is that there is a will. . . . And it's going to be found. If the police don't find it, I mean to, somehow. . . . He wouldn't say who was the heir. He was mocking about it—but he kept on saying I could destroy it if it didn't suit me. . . . I'm quite sure he knew I didn't benefit under it. Besides, it seems to have been made a long time ago—before my uncle ever adopted me at all. . . . No, when I went last night it was in the expectation of proving myself a beggar. . . . But I just wanted to settle things one way or another. I couldn't bear the suspense of things as they were."

"But it hasn't been found. . . . Perhaps it will never be found."

"McCleod will find it. After all, he knows it's in that room and they need it as evidence for the murder. They'll find it if they have to pull the place to pieces. . . . But if they didn't, I could never feel safe. And, you see, without the money, I'm so helpless at the present time."

"But you can find something. . . . You will find something, Mark."

"I'm going to." There was a grim determination in his voice and his jaw set firmly. "Only, it may take years before——"

"Before what?" she prompted as he broke off miserably.

"Before I could keep you—keep a wife as I ought to be able to. . . . It's impossible."

There was a long silence which was at last broken by Celia.

"Mark. Mark, look at me. . . . I don't know what sort of a scale you think I'm used to living on. . . . My father died when I was quite young. We had no money. I was a typist, and I had to earn enough for myself and my mother almost from the beginning. Do you know what a typist earns as a beginner? Well, it's not enough to make

one feel out of place if you don't live in a palace, Mark, I could manage on very little. . . . There's no reason why I shouldn't go on earning my living at first——”

Mark frowned; then the expression of hopelessness reappeared on his face. He shook his head.

“It's no good, Celia. . . . It's not only this murder business. It's partly myself. . . . I'm not a good match for anyone, and I don't think I ever shall be. Sometimes I feel that this—the atmosphere I've been living in—has made me—made me queer——”

“Mark. Be quiet. No doubt it's right enough you should tell me this; but you mustn't make too much of it. . . . It's almost as if you were revelling in being sorry for yourself—and that never did any good to anyone.” She had meant to shock him out of his depression, but it was not without a pang she saw him wince. A slow flush spread over his face. “Now, listen to me. . . . You've asked me to marry you. You think you're fond of me. I refused you. But it wasn't for either of the reasons you gave. . . . I refused you, Mark, because I was fond of you.”

“Because——?” Mark looked at her without comprehension.

“Yes. . . . Why on earth do you think I've been running about after you like this if I wasn't? Why should I follow you last night? It would have been absurd.”

“But but——” Mark stammered and stopped.

“But, you see, I've got a certain amount of pride, too. And though it wasn't my reason, everyone would have thought I was a little gold-digger running after the innocent young heir to the estate. . . . That was what I thought this morning when you asked me. . . . It was a little too much like King Cophetua and the beggar-maid—and I shouldn't like to be the beggar-maid——”

“But, Celia, I didn't mean to be like that——”

“I know you didn't—or I shouldn't be saying this now.

... Mark, if you had been the heir, I wouldn't have had you. . . . Now, I'm glad you're not. . . . We can manage somehow."

Mark half stretched out his arms, and dropped them again. He scowled at nothing in particular.

"Don't you think I have any pride?" he asked harshly. "It's impossible. . . . It's hopeless."

"Nothing's hopeless—if you really mean to have your way. . . . And, Mark, I mean to have mine!"

Mark would not raise his eyes to see the smile on her face. Suddenly he felt a soft arm about his neck, and two soft lips crushed his cheek fiercely. The next moment he had clasped her to him.

"Celia," he said at last. "Celia, you know I——"

"I know, darling."

All at once she drew back her head and looked at him. There was a tremulous smile on her lips.

"Mark, you needn't look so grim. . . . Even if I had to be so forward to bring you to your senses!"

Mark laughed, and in his laugh there was sheer happiness. For the moment, all the difficulties of their position had vanished. He was just going to kiss her again when the door opened. It was too late even for them to break guiltily apart. Mr. Bembridge stood upon the threshold, regarding them in shocked amazement.

Mark rose to his feet as Celia slipped from his knee. He led her forward towards the solicitor with a smile which the other showed no signs of reciprocating. He was looking older, and more grave than usual, and he had the appearance of a man who has not slept.

"Won't you be the first to congratulate me, Mr. Bembridge?" Mark suggested. "Celia and I are going to be——"

Bembridge made an impatient gesture. "My dear Mark," he broke out. "If I may take the privilege of the family solicitor—and of an old family friend, Mark—I should like to speak to you very seriously."

He glanced meaningly at the girl. Mark flushed.

"I was on the point of telling you, sir," he said stiffly, "that Miss Vernon is going to be my wife. If you have anything to say to me, there is no reason why she should not hear it."

The solicitor hesitated; then made a little gesture of resignation.

"Very well," he said. He hesitated for a moment, and then went on. "I was informed last night—by someone who appears to have more care for your interests than you have yourself—that you had evaded the police watch and had gone out to Broughton House. . . . I hurried after you at once. And, as you know, I arrived too late."

"Well?" Mark asked rather ungraciously as he stopped.

"Things were even worse than I had believed they could be. You must have known that your position before last night was serious, Mark. I am afraid, now, that it is desperate. I have reason to believe that the police are only holding their hand until certain details are cleared up. If they can trace the gun——"

"They can't," Mark interjected. "It's not mine."

"If they can find the will, and it is not in your favour, I do not see how they can avoid charging you with both murders, Mark. And, my boy, I don't see that you have any real hope of an acquittal."

Mark's face had gone very pale, but his eyes were steady.

"Then you yourself think that I am guilty, sir?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Mark," Bembridge pleaded almost pathetically. "It isn't what I believe. It is the weight of the evidence, Mark, that they can put before a jury; and I have to admit to myself that it is overwhelming."

"But—but I *saw* the murderer!" Celia cried out. "I can prove it wasn't Mark——"

"I know, my dear young lady. . . . But you couldn't identify him if you saw him—much less say who he is. . . . Could you?"

"I—I don't think so."

"That being so, would the announcement which you have just made to me encourage a jury to believe Miss Vernon's evidence? Isn't her whole story grotesquely unlikely? And apart from that, Mark, you are the one person—the only person—who could have done both murders. Mark, you're bound to be convicted."

Mark was silent for a moment. There was a curious expression on his face.

"I appreciate that, Mr. Bembridge," he said at last. "And I appreciate your sympathy. . . . But I don't quite understand why you have come. We went into all this last night. Perhaps there isn't any hope for me unless they find the real murderer. But what am I to do?"

Bembridge seemed to be struggling with his feelings. He moistened his lips with his tongue.

"It's because I'm fond of you, Mark," he said at last. "And because I knew your parents. I'm the last person who ought to suggest it, much less to help. Mark, don't you think you'd better get away—before——?"

"What?" Mark asked incredulously.

"Oh, I know it might be taken as an admission of guilt. But, you see, Mark, what we need most of all is time. . . . You would have friends working for you. . . . We might find out eventually. . . . If you could hide somewhere . . . for a few months, even. . . . I believe we could arrange it——"

"Sir, I've no intention of running away," Mark interrupted. "Of course, I appreciate your offer. But surely it's better to face things now rather than confirm everyone's suspicions. . . . I shall stay."

Bembridge bowed his head and stood in silence for a moment. Then, without another word, he turned and left the room. Mark stood staring as the door closed behind him.

"Mark——" Celia faltered. "Mark, are you sure——"

It seemed as though he had not heard her. He was frowning, and on his face doubt and suspicion were blended.

"He suggested it," he said almost to himself. "But why——?"

"I suppose he thinks—that he meant it for the best. . . . It isn't—it can't be——"

"It would be absolutely the worst thing possible," Mark said with conviction. "At the present moment, black as things are, I believe McCleod believes more or less what I've told them. If he didn't, I should have been in gaol by now. There's just one thing which would make my being charged with the murders a certainty—and that is, if I ran away. And Bembridge recommends it. . . . Why does he? Is it just that he's an old fool? . . . I've always thought he was fond of me. . . . I'm sure he was fond of me. And yet——"

"What, Mark?" Celia asked as he paused.

"It's beastly," Mark said rather shamefacedly. "Even to think it. . . . That's what a business like this does to one. . . . But he might want me to be suspected—because he's guilty himself!"

CHAPTER XVI

A HOT SCENT

It was twelve noon before McCleod could get away from the immediate investigations caused by the death of Little; and even so he left the Superintendent to deal with a good many details. Higson was one of them; but Higson had not yet recovered consciousness. Besides, McCleod was not worrying very much about the butler. He thought there was an explanation for that. His immediate aim was

to reach the neighbouring town of Burnbury before rumour or the evening papers managed to disseminate the story of the murder at Broughton House.

In the interval he had managed to acquire a good deal of necessary information. He knew on whose land the house had been built; who sold the land, who built the house, who painted it, who did the plumbing and a whole variety of details about its construction. Those were what had taken him to Burnbury; for two of the relevant firms, and one of these the most likely of all, had their businesses in that town.

He arrived there just about lunch-time, and, after hesitating between the police station and the old inn in the market-place, chose the latter. It was over bread and cheese and beer, in the commercial room, that he pumped the loquacious landlord, who, very naturally deciding he was a commercial, showed no reluctance to impart all he knew. In fact, he did better, by providing a local commercial directory, printed at the office of the *Burnbury Weekly News*, and assisting McCleod with comments. At the second name on the list headed "Painters and Decorators" he shook his head.

"Bowness and Son?" he said. "You won't do much there. . . . Gone to the dogs, that has."

McCleod affected surprise. "Why," he said, "surely they used to get some good contracts? What's wrong——?"

"Ay, in the old man's time. . . . Old Micky Bowness, he'd about the biggest business in the town, till his trouble came."

"He's dead?"

"Might as well be. Hasn't moved hand or foot or tongue for the past five years, and I heard lately he's not expected to last much longer. . . . A deliverance, I reckon."

"I suppose it's his son who carries on the business?"

"Ay. Young fool! When he first took charge, he was going to show everyone how—but somehow the town

didn't see it. . . . Then he took up with some silly politics gang, and chucked that. Now he's with the drinking lot. Business? I reckon there isn't any business. How many men d'you think he's got now? One and a boy. And his father——"

"I think I knew some of them," McCleod said reflectively. "Wasn't there a chap called Little?"

"Ay. Will Little—— 'Little Willie' they called him. . . . He got the sack, I remember."

"Wasn't there a Bandridge? Some name like that?"

The landlord thought. "Joe Bandridge? No, he was with Henryson's the builders, just round the corner. A plasterer, he was. Died a couple of years ago——"

"Wonder if you remember anyone else about Little's time? I expect I should know them if I heard the names."

The landlord thought, and suggested a name or two, but none which conveyed anything. He abandoned the point, since in all probability he could derive the information more easily from another source, and after a little more general conversation the detective finished his beer and departed. By following the landlord's directions, he had little trouble in locating the place which he sought. It was a big house, and the large yard and sheds suggested that it had once been a substantial business; but now the whole place wore an air of neglect which suggested rather that it needed painting itself than that anyone could get painting done there. Evidently the landlord's remarks about the decadence of the firm had a solid basis of fact.

He rang the bell and waited. Although he had heard it clanking hollowly somewhere in the rear of the premises, it was several minutes, and he was on the point of ringing again, before at last the door opened. An untidy middle-aged woman stood in the opening and eyed him with unconcealed hostility. McCleod raised his hat.

"Good afternoon," he said politely, and made his smile

as winning as possible. "Could I see Mr. Bowness for a few minutes, please?"

"No," came the uncompromising answer. "He's ill. Can't see anyone."

"It's young Mr. Bowness I mean——"

"No. . . . If it's business, we can't take more on at present. And we don't want nothing——"

"I'm not travelling. It's like this. . . . I'm trying to trace an old friend who worked for this firm a good while ago. It might help me if I could see when he left, and perhaps get in touch with some of his mates——"

"I'm sorry. You can't see young Mr. Bowness. He's in bed, sick. And me with two to nurse——"

"If you could take a message——"

"I won't. He's bad. . . . Groaning all night, and hot as fire. Come on all at once."

"What's the matter?" McCleod asked sympathetically, more with a view to clinging on to the one topic of conversation which prevented the door from being slammed in his face than anything else. "Hope it's not serious?"

"Something internal, I'd say myself. Consumption, likely as not. Coughing blood, he's been. . . . I'm expecting the doctor any minute. Thought you was him."

"Then, of course, I mustn't trouble him," McCleod said sympathetically. "But I wonder if it would be possible for me to look at the old wages book, if he's kept it. If you could let me——? That couldn't do any harm to anyone——"

"No. I couldn't. In any case, they aren't here. There's a pile of old books in the shop, all right, but that's locked, unless George is there. . . . You might try him. He'd know more of the business than I do. . . . Good day to you."

The door had shut before McCleod had any further opportunity of trying his powers of persuasion. There was, of course, the chance that George would prove more amenable; but it was evidently no use knocking again at

the house. With a final glance at the unresponsive windows he turned along the side of the house towards the big double gate which gave access to the yard. It was unlocked, and he pushed it open.

It gave into quite an extensive space, unpaved, and littered with the usual collection of scaffolding, ladders and empty paint-tins. At the far end a long shed of corrugated iron was obviously the paint shop. Beside it was a smaller structure, which might have been meant for an office; though the new large door upon it rather suggested its present use as a garage. Even as he started to walk across towards the larger building he felt that his luck was out, and as he approached he saw that its door was securely padlocked. Plainly George could not be inside; but, familiar with the casual methods of locking up which frequently prevail in householders and business men, he wasted a few minutes looking in likely places for the key. But George was evidently a person who pocketed the key, or his hiding place was too clever. With the thought that perhaps he could at least obtain some knowledge of the inside, in case it proved necessary, he peered through one dusty window after another. And at the third, almost straight opposite him, a long line of torn and dusty ledgers and account books on a shelf rewarded him. Judging by their number and condition, they must go back to the very foundation of the firm. He had little doubt that what he wanted was there, but he could not reach it.

For a moment he was tempted. That he could make short work either of the padlock or of one of the windows was a certainty; but there was the risk of serious trouble if he were caught. The fact that his presence was as yet unknown to the Burnbury police only made matters worse. His one hope seemed to be the return of George; but George might be hours. It might even be necessary to enlist the help of the police in finding George, and probably the station was the next place he should go to. But first,

there could be no harm in investigating the smaller shed. None of the house windows looked that way; the woman inside could not see him. He crossed the yard and gave the door a tentative pull.

Plainly this was locked as well; though, here again, not so securely that it would have troubled him to force it. His idea that it was a garage was confirmed by the oil-stains outside, in which he could make out the double wheel marks. They were too narrow even for the smallest car, and he mentally decided on a motor-cycle combination. Something stirred in his memory as he was actually turning away. The tracks were quite fresh; at least they could not have been made more than a few hours before. He bent down to examine them more closely. Certainly they looked the same; but the make was common enough, and one new tyre is very like another. He could not be sure.

And then he noticed something else. It was a reddish-brown stain of some size near the right-hand corner of the door. Stains, red or otherwise, were, of course, natural enough in a painter's yard; but now his suspicions were aroused. He stooped and tested it with his finger. It was sticky, but not with the stickiness of paint. It was not paint. It was——

“Good God!”

Everything suddenly slipped into place, and he cursed his stupidity in not seeing it before. The tyre tracks, the bloodstain, the sudden illness of young Bowness, his coughing of blood. It simply shouted at one, and in trying to get a simple and prosaic piece of information he had stumbled by accident upon a hot scent.

It was so unexpected that he stood there for a moment in doubt. Now, it was more than ever necessary to investigate the affairs of Bowness and Son, not only in the past, but as late as last night. But now it was all the more important not to betray his interest until he was quite sure. He thought of the police station, and wondered whether the

available evidence would be sufficient to convince them, without the necessity of sending for casts of the tyre marks at Broughton House. In the books on the shelf in the paint shed that evidence must undoubtedly exist, and he hardly dared to leave them. Suppose the woman told Bowness? Suppose George, on his return, were given orders to destroy the ledgers? Suppose the young man was not too ill to make a bolt for it on his motor-cycle? Temptation came to him again, and he moved back to the padlocked door. What he wanted would only take a minute or two. The wages book, if he could find it, would never be missed. He was actually on the point of commencing operations when a gruff voice hailed him from behind.

"Hi! What d'you want there, young feller?"

McCleod would not have called himself old; but he had passed the time when he nourished any illusions about being young. There was, however, every excuse for the speaker. A white, bushy, walrus moustache blossomed from a wrinkled face which might have seen at least eighty years; and the bowler hat which surmounted it might have been almost as ancient.

"I wanted to see Mr. Bowness——" McCleod began, more to gain time than anything else. He was thinking quickly. It was dangerous, now, to repeat his request for the books; besides, the suspicious gleam in the old man's eyes suggested that he was not in the least likely to grant it without authorization.

"Well, yer can't. . . . Anyways, he wouldn't padlock himself in the shop, would he?"

McCleod laughed. "No, I'd just found it was locked. . . . Perhaps you're George?"

"Maybe I am."

"I'd just called at the house, but they put me off. Said Mr. Bowness was ill or something. They told me you you were dealing with the business——"

"Ay. I am. . . . But we don't want nothing."

Evidently, McCleod decided, there must be some resemblance which had so far eluded him between himself and a decorators' traveller; and he decided to accept it.

"Perhaps I might see Mr. Bowness himself, when he's better?" he suggested.

"Perhaps you mightn't. . . . Perhaps you might attend his funeral, if you ask me. Proper bad, he is. . . . Just dotty."

"Mad?"

"Raving, I mean. . . . What d'you call it? Deelirious. . . . Pneumonia, I say, along of that bike of his. I saw him setting off last night——" He broke off. "Anyway, you can't see 'im, I don't want nothing, and I don't want to stand chatting here all day to you."

His manner was the reverse of encouraging, and he evidently meant the last words as a final dismissal. But McCleod persisted, all the more in view of the old man's last words. It seemed that his luck still held, and he had found an actual witness to young Bowness's departure for Broughton House.

"Out last night?" he said. "Ah. That was probably why I couldn't get in touch with him when I rang up. . . . I suppose that would be about half-past nine or ten?"

"Maybe it was. . . . You weren't the chap who wanted him on business, then?"

It was plain that curiosity was struggling with a naturally suspicious and churlish disposition, and for the moment curiosity had won.

"Well, I wanted to fix an appointment for to-day. . . . But, as I say, I couldn't get in touch with him. I suppose the other man got in first."

"Ay. . . . And what sort of business would take him out that time on a dirty night? That's what I want to know——" He broke off, apparently aware that he was giving information rather than receiving it. "What was it you wanted him for?"

"It was a purely personal matter—an inquiry I wanted to make." McCleod hesitated. He was not quite sure how wise it might be to go any further. If he were guilty, Bowness might be expected to be suspicious about any inquiry, and, should the old man tell him of a stranger's visit, he might bolt before they could catch him. On the other hand, all the evidence was that he could not bolt far. He decided to risk it. "Perhaps you could help me yourself," he suggested. "You've been here a long time, haven't you?"

"Ah. You may say that. Forty years. Man and boy, forty years. Left him, I did, when I finished my 'prenticeship, but he wanted me back. I wasn't coming though, till he gave me my price. Tight on the cash, the old boy was, but he knew a good man."

"I'm sure he did," McCleod said flatteringly. "The fact is, I was looking for an old friend—or rather, the friend of an old friend. I don't know his name, but I know that he worked for Mr. Bowness years ago—oh, I suppose about twenty-five years or more. And I know that he was with my friend working on a job at Broughton House. That was the name I'm almost sure——"

"Broughton House," the old man repeated reflectively. "Ay, we painted that."

"Perhaps you were on the job yourself?"

"Not me. . . . Grainer and paper-hanger, I was. . . . Come to think of it, I quarrelled with the old man about that very job. . . . Going to put me on the paper-hanging, he was. 'That's fresh plaster,' I says. 'You can't put paper on that, not to stick. Better let 'em give it a coat of distemper,' I says. 'But the lady wants paper,' he says. 'We'll have to put it on.' 'Well then,' I says, 'it'll fall off again, and that'll make another job.' Maybe that's what he thought, too, because he was a cunning one in his time. But he didn't put me on the job."

"Perhaps you can remember who did it?"

"No. . . . Can't say I can."

"It might be rather important. . . . Was there a chap called Little?"

McCleod risked the question in the knowledge that he would in all probability be returning in his official capacity before the news of Little's murder had had time to penetrate to Burnbury. In any case, in the accounts which had been given to the Press so far the name had been suppressed.

"Little? Might have been. . . . We had a chap called that for a year or two. But he left. Weren't up to much. . . . Ay, Little would probably be there."

"And who else?" McCleod saw him beginning to shake his head and hurried on. "I'm very anxious to find out. Perhaps the books would tell? It'd be worth ten bob to know——"

"Well, mister, I won't say I mightn't find out," George said, and eyed him reflectively. "Ten bob, you said?"

"Yes. . . . But I want to know soon. I suppose Mr. Bowness wouldn't object? Perhaps I'd better see him——"

George smiled and winked a crafty old eye. He had probably considered that, if Bowness were consulted, he would give the information for nothing. The wink was intended to convey that his employer would not object, because he would never know.

"Well—I'll be back in about an hour, if you can find it. . . . And thank you. Good afternoon."

"Thank you, mister. . . . Good afternoon."

On the whole, McCleod was satisfied with the result. He retraced his steps to the main road, and was on the point of turning the corner to go past the front of the house when he was aware that the front door was open, and that the housekeeper, still as obdurate as ever, but this time it seemed to him distinctly more apologetic in manner, was engaged in repelling yet another visitor. A car was drawn up beside the pavement from which the new arrival, a professional-looking man carrying a small bag, had appar-

ently descended. Even without the woman's remark, he would have had no difficulty in identifying the doctor's visit, and a few words reached him which confirmed the impression.

"——greatly regret that he refuses to let me see him——grave responsibility——" Obviously the doctor was annoyed. "——very serious symptoms——might have to notify——call me at once—— Good day."

McCleod nodded to himself as the doctor slammed the car door and drove off. Here, if it was needed, was confirmation of what he had thought. Apparently young Bowness, so suddenly taken ill during the night, had refused medical treatment, and it was not difficult to guess why. Certainly there was no time to waste in trying any round-about methods. With something like a sigh he made his way down the street in the direction of the police station.

CHAPTER XVII

TWO CONFESSIONS

THOUGH a little piqued by McCleod's refusal to disclose the particular line on which he proposed to work the Superintendent himself had much too much to do to worry about it unduly. The task of clearing up any details at Broughton House had been entrusted to the local Inspector; Cary himself had undertaken the interviewing of Higson and Kathleen Bramley, and hoped besides to pursue a pet idea of his own. Of the three, the obtaining of the letter from the girl obviously took first place, all the more since Higson was not yet well enough to talk. He was knocking at her door some time before he could reasonably expect a young lady to be up under the circumstances, and

it was only after half an hour's waiting that he finally gained admission.

On the whole, the interview provided some confirmation of the theory that being knocked out was good for Kathleen Bramley. Previously the Superintendent, a man of conservative and unromantic views on marriage, had never been able to understand why any man in his senses should want her for a wife. Now, although she was very pale, he admitted that to a young man she might be distinctly attractive, and her manner was distinctly conciliating.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Inspector. . . . Please smoke if you want to. . . . Here it is."

Cary took the letter and studied it with interest, holding it carefully by the edges, in case of fingerprints. Undoubtedly it was a remarkable document. At the first glimpse he had almost thought there had been some mistake. The fine, regular script in which it was written, without a line or letter out of place, was so meticulously accurate as actually to suggest a page out of a printed book. It occurred to him that that very regularity would make it extremely hard to identify; though it confirmed the idea McCleod had received from the plan that the composer had had some training in draughtsmanship. There must be very few people in the district who could produce anything half so perfect.

In its own way, the text was scarcely less remarkable, chiefly by its extreme clarity. If Kathleen Bramley had got lost and arrived late, it was through no fault of her guide; for the directions, taken in conjunction with the plan, were as near perfect as they could be. Cary, who had been studying the map, noted that the writer had prescribed a much easier, if a little longer, route than the complicated cross-country zig-zag by which Newley had taken them, and he was plainly familiar with that part of the district even in its minutest details.

For the rest, it told him very little that they did not know before. The paper was ordinary enough, and might have been purchased at a dozen places in the neighbourhood, and though it would, of course, have to be tested for prints, Cary did not believe for a moment that anyone capable of producing such a letter would have been so careless. On the whole, it considerably increased his respect for the murderer's ability. He looked up to find the girl's eyes upon him.

"Is it—does it help?" she asked eagerly.

"I hope it will, miss," he answered. "You say that you didn't keep the envelope?"

"No. You see, it was addressed in the same script. I quite thought it was a typewritten circular, and I'd thrown the envelope on the fire before I even looked at it. . . . I never saw the postmark at all."

Cary inclined his head in assent. He was bound to admit that the mistake would have been a natural one. He thought for a moment.

"You've no idea, miss, who the author could possibly have been? I mean, it's obvious that he knows a good deal about you. It must be someone among your friends and acquaintances, I should think."

"I've tried to guess. . . . But I can't think of anyone. . . . But you do think it will help—help to get Francis freed?"

On that point the Superintendent could be reassuring. He had reason to believe that it was only a matter of hours before the young man was released.

"I expect he'll be out to-day, miss," he said. "Of course, he'd never have been detained if he hadn't insisted on confessing. We never thought that confession was true. . . . Only, you see, miss, there was the difficulty that you and he might have been working together and—well, to put it plainly, miss, we weren't sure that you'd told us the whole truth that morning."

Kathleen Bramley hesitated, clenching and unclenching one hand upon the handkerchief which it held.

"I—I didn't," she admitted after a considerable pause. "You see, things were so bad that I daren't—I daren't make them worse. For Francis's sake as well as mine."

"Now, that's where you were wrong miss," Cary assured her. "It's better to tell the truth, even if it sounds bad—because if people find you're lying that's worse than ever."

"I'll tell you. . . . Though I hardly know where to begin. Perhaps it's easiest to say that the Inspector was right—on nearly every point."

Cary nodded, not without satisfaction. "I see, miss," he said. "But perhaps if you'd tell me in your own words . . . Of course, I must warn you it may be used as evidence——"

"Of course." She paused, and then started in a low voice, gaining strength as she proceeded. "After—after Francis had seen his uncle that morning he came straight to me. He was terribly upset—more than I had ever seen him. And so was I when he told me what Mr. Henstone had said. We could neither of us understand it at all. It meant so much to us both. I had known Mr. Henstone—when—when I used to see Mark. I thought I might persuade him. After Mark had gone, I hurried round to the house." She stopped. "You see, I wanted to get there before he could actually give instructions to Mr. Newley. If he'd once given the order, he'd never have gone back on it."

There was a hesitation about the last two sentences which did not escape Cary. He ventured a question.

"You'll pardon my asking, miss—but was that your only reason for going at once?"

There was a long silence before she answered, and when she did her voice was little above a whisper.

"No," she confessed. "And it's just for this reason that I've been lying to you. It may be against Francis, but I said I'd tell the whole truth. And without it, you might not understand some of what happened. . . . While we were

talking it over, Francis had spoken wildly about—about his uncle's dying, and—and——”

“About the medicine?”

“Yes.” The word was scarcely audible. Then she looked up and met Cary's eyes with a kind of fierceness. “But he didn't do it! I was a fool ever to think he could have done it! He was very excited and he didn't speak very clearly. . . . Actually I wanted to get there before he took the medicine. . . . I could have knocked it over by accident—or done something. . . . I got there only just in time—and then the butler wouldn't let me in. I couldn't tell him. It mightn't have been so. In fact, it wasn't as I thought. Francis didn't do it. . . . When he left me, I ran round to the window and went in.”

“Go on, miss,” Cary prompted. There was not a shadow of doubt that he was hearing the truth now.

“Mr. Henstone was asleep,” she continued after a moment's hesitation. “I locked the door. I meant to make him listen to me, and I didn't want Newley to interrupt us. . . . Then I saw the glass was empty. I'd come too late for that. His chair was by the side of the table, and he'd evidently just taken it——”

“Is that quite true, miss?” Cary asked. “You locked the door before you looked at the medicine?”

“It—it isn't. . . . I saw the empty tumbler as soon as I went in. I locked the door hoping I could hide what had happened. Then I picked up the glass——”

“We knew you'd done that, miss. Your fingerprints were on it, of course.” He waited. “And then, miss?”

“I didn't know what to do. I stood by the table a minute. You might have found prints there too. . . . I wasn't sure. . . . Mr. Henstone seemed all right. I suppose the poison hadn't had time——”

A sudden light came to Cary. “There were some photographic proofs there,” he said. “I suppose you didn't happen to touch them, miss?”

"Yes. . . . I picked them up. . . . I do fiddle with things when I'm nervous or frightened. . . . I'm a photographer myself. I noticed the top one was spoiling, even then; and I turned them over. I wasn't really thinking about it at all. . . . And then someone knocked. . . . I suppose it was Miss Vernon. I lost my head. I'd just decided that the medicine must be all right and that I needn't do anything. I heard her go away. Then I unlocked the door and went back through the window to the front door. It seemed to have been ages, but the whole thing took less than five minutes."

"And that's all, miss?"

"That's all. . . . You do believe me?"

"Personally, miss, I do. . . . And I don't know that you've done either yourself or Mr. Carlton any harm by telling me. You see, we knew you'd been there—and you'd already let out that the medicine had been mentioned—— But the print proved that you'd been in the room."

"I never thought of that. . . . Though I was terrified that you would find out. I was afraid I'd been seen—by one of the gardeners. A short, white-haired man. He was just going into the bushes, but he was in a hurry, and I expect——"

"What?" Cary said explosively. "A short——! Was he going away from the room? When you saw him? Where was he?"

"He was just crossing the lawn as I came along the terrace. I didn't see him come out of the room——"

"Miss Bramley," Cary said, "did you see Little?"

"The man who was murdered—in the house—last night?" She shook her head. "No. I never saw him."

"Then——" He felt in his breast pocket and produced a photograph. "D'you mind looking at this? I'm afraid it's not exactly pleasant. You see, it was taken after he was dead. . . . But was that the man?"

A sudden hope shone in her face, and she took the print without a qualm. Then she drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she said.

"Then—then Little was your gardener. . . . And he was just coming away from the house. He'd been in the house. It was his print on the bottle——"

He broke off, suddenly aware of his indiscretion.

"You mean—you mean that Little killed him?"

"Well, miss—I shouldn't have said it. . . . But it looks as if he might have done. . . . But you mustn't say a word——"

"But—but who killed Little?"

For the moment, Cary was not prepared to say. And he was in a hurry. There was a good deal to be done at once. He rose to his feet.

"I must go, miss," he said. "And thank you. . . . I believe you may have put us on the right track. . . . And I expect you'll be seeing Mr. Carlton before to-night. . . . Good morning."

It was obvious enough, he thought, as he hurried to the station. They had even had the idea—but this was proof, and he suddenly found himself with a fairly plausible theory of the crime. There had been a will. It was in Little's favour. Little had reminded Henstone of it, when he wrote about Broughton House. Then Little had somehow heard that Henstone was making a will. If he was to benefit, something had to be done to stop that. He had gone there surreptitiously—and taken his chance in the few minutes between Newley's departure and Miss Bramley's visit.

Two puzzles remained. How had he known about the proposed will? Who had killed him, and why? And it flashed upon him that he might receive the answer to both those questions that very morning.

He had put in a busy quarter of an hour, mostly on the telephone; had sent for Little's fingerprints, and tried unsuccessfully to contact McCleod when the telephone rang from the hospital. He listened; then jumped to his feet in excitement. The sergeant, unused to such tem-

peramental displays on the part of his usually stolid superior, looked at him in surprise.

"Anything wrong, sir?" he asked.

"Everything's right," Cary answered. "Get me a shorthand man. . . . I'll be in the car. Hurry."

If Cary had had any bowels of compassion that morning, he might have been moved to pity by the pathetic spectacle which the butler presented lying in bed. He seemed all at once to have aged enormously, and, shorn of his professional garments and manner seemed quite another man. But Cary at that moment regarded Higson only as certain evidence, and perhaps as a possible murderer. He adopted his most uncompromising manner as he seated himself by the bed.

"Now, my man," he said. "I've no doubt you realize that there are a few explanations due from you. . . . I'd better warn you that anything you say will be taken down, and may be used in evidence. I'd better tell you, too, that we know more than you may think, so if you say anything, it had better be the truth. . . . Do you wish to make a statement, or not?"

Higson nodded. "About last night, Superintendent? Yes, I can see that I shall have to. But I'd better begin a bit further back than that. . . . I suppose Inspector McCleod recognized me that morning? I knew him."

"He did," Cary said grimly. "And we've confirmed it since. We know that you were convicted and did time."

"I hoped I'd changed enough. . . . After all, sir, it is hard, after thirty years of good service. But, in a way, it makes it easier to explain. . . . Well, I needn't say that for a servant to have anything like that against him is fatal. . . . And I don't expect you'll believe me when I tell you that, in fact, I wasn't guilty. The Inspector's evidence was all right. I don't know who did it to this day. But I didn't. . . . So, when I came out I was feeling desperate. And, after a bit, I did really do something

wrong. . . . I wrote myself a couple of references, and got a job on them. . . . You see, it all depends who you're dealing with. Some people take a good deal on trust. They never took up the references. . . . I was in that place twenty years and rose to be butler there, with never a single complaint. When my master died, I applied for the job at Mr. Henstone's, and got it."

"Well?" Cary demanded.

"Mr. Henstone was just about as different from my old master as chalk from cheese. He took up the reference to the post I had been in—and found out where I was supposed to have come from. And, of course, he discovered the forgeries. Then he seems to have gone into it properly. He even wormed out about the conviction somehow. . . . And, one day, without warning, he told me he knew——"

He spoke hoarsely. Cary, not without a certain commiseration, handed him the glass of water, and he drank; then went on.

"Mr. Henstone was a queer man. I suppose it was being an invalid did it. He didn't sack me. I believe he liked the idea of having someone whose life he could ruin at any moment. He didn't sack me. He just tortured me with the knowledge that he could. I daren't leave him, and only one thing kept me going at all. . . . Mr. Mark, sir, was always what a gentleman should be. I wouldn't have minded telling him, even. But my one hope was that his uncle would die and he'd take on."

He stopped for a moment. Cary waited.

"Go on," he prompted.

"It seemed a long time coming. . . . And after a bit, I found that Mr. Henstone had got it in for Mr. Mark as well as for me. I felt he'd play him some trick. And someone else did too. So, when the gentleman spoke to me, I didn't see any harm in keeping him informed about what happened in the house—so far as Mr. Mark might be concerned. Well, about Mr. Henstone's murder, there

wasn't any need. He knew all about that, and how Mr. Mark was suspected. But last night I overheard you and Mr. Newley. I thought Mr. Mark was going to get into trouble, and I couldn't help him. I hoped the gentleman might. But I couldn't use the house phone. The police had charge of it. . . . I climbed out, all right, and phoned him from a call box. But I'm not so young as I was. I couldn't get back, and with me struggling the pipe gave way. . . . I couldn't move. I lay there a long time. Then I think I fainted. . . . And that's all."

"That's all?" Cary echoed. "You mean, you admit supplying information to someone outside the house; you admit leaving surreptitiously to do so last night. . . . Do you, or do you not, know who was responsible for Mr. Henstone's death?"

"I do not, sir. I know Mr. Mark didn't, sir."

"Were you, or were you not, acquainted with a man named Little?"

Higson thought. "Not so far as my memory serves me, sir."

"Then, in fact, you can tell us nothing about the actual crimes?"

"Nothing more than I've told, sir."

Cary sat frowning. It was not in the least what he had expected or hoped for. And yet it might be true. If it was, there was nothing very criminal about it, except the thirty-year-old forgery.

"Is there anything you would like to add?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"There is one point," Cary said after a pause, "and that is the name of the man to whom you phoned. That may be a vital point. . . . Who was it?"

The butler hesitated. Hitherto he had been answering the questions with commendable frankness, but now his face clouded a little.

"I don't think, sir, that I could say. . . . Not without asking

him, sir. It's all right for myself, but I'm not going to get anyone else into trouble."

"That's absurd," said Cary sharply. "Besides, why should it get him into trouble? Of course you'd no business to reveal the affairs of the family to outsiders, but if he didn't make any bad use of the information——"

"I'll swear he wouldn't, sir. It was just to help Mr. Mark he was doing it. I wouldn't have said a word but for that."

"Maybe that's just what he was pretending," Cary suggested. "But if you ask me, there was a very different reason."

He paused significantly. The disquiet in the butler's face increased.

"I don't—I don't understand, sir."

"Well—why do you think we've not arrested Mr. Mark?"

"He is innocent, sir."

"Maybe . . . But there's plenty of evidence to justify his arrest, and perhaps to convict him. Why haven't we arrested him?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Because we believe that the evidence may have been planted against him. Because we think there's someone who's trying to get him convicted of the murders. See? We want to find that other man. And who's more likely than this chap who poses as a friend, but wants to be kept informed about what is happening in the house, and what Mark is doing and so on? See?"

Cary had been quite unwontedly eloquent, and it was not without its effect on Higson. He struggled with his feelings.

"This gentleman wouldn't do that, sir," he said stoutly.

"Are you sure? Don't forget your master's life may depend on it. . . . What harm can it do telling me his name?"

"I don't want to get him into trouble . . . Besides, he never would——"

Cary decided to give it up for the moment. He tried for the last time.

"You may get into trouble yourself soon . . . Who was it?"

"I've nothing to say about that, sir."

There was a dogged obstinacy in his voice which augured the worst. Cary might still have pressed him, but a sudden inspiration came to him.

"Why, of course, it was Mr. Bembridge!" he said rather than asked. "That was how he came last night?"

Higson hesitated. "Yes, it was," he said at last.

Cary eyed him sternly. "Well, my man, we'll see if you've told the truth. You're safe enough for a day or two, with that leg. . . . I'll get that statement typed out and bring it for you to sign. . . . Good morning."

He stood thinking deeply for a full minute before he stepped into the waiting car.

"You'd better drive me to Bembridge's," he said. "I wonder——?"

CHAPTER XVIII

SECOND MURDERER

IN the office of the Burnbury police station, Inspector McCleod was fuming with impatience as he waited for official wheels to revolve sufficiently to produce the necessary warrants and authority; and his impatience was not in the least soothed by the obvious belief of the Inspector in charge that a member of a respected old Burnbury family could not possibly be involved in anything so disgraceful as a murder.

"Well, I don't know," he said for about the sixth time. "No doubt it looks a bit bad. But old Bowness has been here for years, and not a word against him. He's well-known in the town——"

"And so's his son, isn't he?" McCleod countered at last, and the shot evidently went home. "I'm not charging old Bowness with the murder. I regard the fact that he's been paralysed for a few years as a good enough alibi. I don't suppose he knows a thing about it. . . . It's his son I'm after. I gather that he, at any rate, isn't exactly a model of virtue."

"Well, he's been a bit wild—but young men often are. I won't deny he dresses a bit funny for a decent tradesman, and there have been one or two stories about him. There was a bill, for instance—but it was paid, and he got it back. He's never been charged with anything here——"

"He's going to be. . . . I'm not saying he's a convicted criminal. What I say is that he wears light riding-breeches and a dark coat, which corresponds to the murderer last night; rides a motor-cycle with the same kind of tyres; that the murderer last night was stabbed by his victim, and that, in the night, he developed a mysterious and dangerous illness which makes him cough blood; that there's blood on his garage door; that he was out on his motor-cycle last night at the right time, and that we have independent evidence that the crime has connexion with the firm of Bowness and Son. . . . I should think that's enough for a search warrant, anyhow."

"Well, if you put it that way," the Inspector admitted reluctantly. "It does sound bad. But we've never heard he had a gun. If he has, it's not licensed, and he's got no permit."

McCleod was moved to sarcasm. "Too bad!" he said sympathetically. "But don't you think, Inspector, he's just the sort of ass who would have an unlicensed gun? I don't think he got it to commit murder with, or anything of

that kind. It was the sheer satisfaction of possessing it. . . . And I think that last night he lost his head completely, and used it."

"But there's no reason why he should kill Little," the Inspector argued. "And I'm hanged if I can see any earthly connexion between him and James Henstone's murder. . . . Of course, Henstone worked for old Bowness for a bit. But Jack wasn't even born then."

"There was enough connexion to bring me here to find him," McCleod said, and left it at that. He argued the point no more, until the arrival of the Chief Constable in person with the requisite warrants put an end to any need for argument.

In McCleod's experience, there were Chief Constables and Chief Constables; and in the present instance he was lucky. Greeted with a great deal more deference than he had received from the Burnbury police, McCleod told his tale simply to a listener who was content to listen.

"Seems pretty clear," the Chief Constable commented. "We'd better get right along. I've got the warrants. . . . Bit of a shock for the town, though—eh, Inspector? Why, old Bowness painted my house!"

This time the housekeeper's reception was very different. She evidently recognized McCleod, but devoted her tearful protestations mainly to the Chief Constable. They had got no further than the doorstep when a second car drew up. McCleod recognized the doctor who had called before. He looked at the group, nodded to the Inspector, and was pushing past when the Chief Constable intervened.

"Excuse me, Doctor——" he began.

"Police, eh?" the doctor asked. "Thought you'd be along. Well, I'm afraid I take precedence. . . . It's a matter of life and death."

"It's young Bowness we want to see, Doctor," the Inspector explained.

"It's young Bowness I'm seeing. As for the old man,

he can't last more than a few hours. . . . But if that's a warrant I see peeping from your pocket, you'd better let me through if you want a chance to serve it."

Without further words, he pushed past them and went upstairs. The frightened housekeeper gave way, and they entered a room on the right-hand side of the hall.

"The doctor saw Mr. Bowness, then?" McCleod inquired.

"Yes, sir. Right after he left, he fainted, and I thought he was gone. . . . So the doctor came back, sir. He's terrible bad."

"What time did he come in last night?"

"I don't know, sir. . . . But I never heard him. . . . I knew there was something wrong this morning, though, sir. There was blood on the stairs. I couldn't think what had happened, so I went to see if he was all right. When I went in, he was lying in bed. Pale as a ghost, he was, and hadn't even undressed. There was more blood on his clothes, and he was coughing——"

"What clothes had he been wearing?"

"Light breeches and his leather coat, sir. . . . And then he got feverish. . . . At first he wanted to know what I was doing there, and told me to get out and mind my own business. Swore dreadful, but weak, sir. I said I was afraid he'd had an accident. He said: 'Yes, that's it, an accident.' So I said I'd get the doctor. That was when he swore. He said I mustn't, and that he'd be all right——"

"But you did?"

"Afterwards, sir. . . . He seemed light-headed and didn't know what he was talking about. But when the doctor came, he wouldn't let us in. Got out of bed, somehow, he had, and locked the door. He shouted to us through it, and we could hear him coughing. When the doctor left, I found he'd unlocked it again. He was lying on the bed, and his face was awful. . . . 'Brandy,' he says, 'get brandy,' and I did. . . . It seemed to do him good. But a little while

later I heard him shouting and laughing. So I sent for the doctor again, and he saw him."

"You didn't think of informing the police?"

"No, sir. . . . Something internal, I thought it was. And then the doctor says: 'He's been stabbed,' he says. 'You do just what I say.' So I did. And he made him comfortable, and said he was coming back——"

McCleod nodded with genuine sympathy. There was something horribly graphic about the woman's description, and Bowness, little though he might appeal to one's affections, was a type which always excited the Inspector's pity. There had been something wrong, somewhere. Wrong up-bringing, too strict or too lenient; a mother who had died young; and the result—— He put the thought from him, and returned to the unrelenting business of his profession.

"When he was delirious," he asked, "can you tell me what he said?"

"It was just nonsense, sir. All about a fortune, and someone called Darnley, and a house. . . . Though I know he'd had letters from Darnley. They're in his desk now, sir."

"We've a warrant to search the house," McCleod said. "You'd better show us. . . . By the way, did he have a gun—a revolver?"

"Well——" the housekeeper hesitated. "I have seen him with one—an old one, I think, sir. . . . But I don't think he could really fire it. . . . He used to keep it locked up, sir. . . . But I've caught him playing with it."

"Would you recognize it?"

"Well, sir. . . . I might. I don't know, sir. . . . Oh, sir, will they hang him?"

"I don't know," McCleod said, and finally got rid of her while they pursued their search through the wounded man's papers. It was not a long task. Apart from a muddle of business letters and bills, with which there had obviously

been no attempt to deal, a single locked drawer was all that the desk had to offer. Failing a key, McCleod forced it, and the first paper he drew from it made him purse his lips in a whistle. The writing was the same as that on the plan which Kathleen Bramley had shown them the night before at the house, and it was signed Darnley.

He had gone through the whole batch with some care half an hour later when the Chief Constable rejoined him, after a thorough search of the house.

"We've found his waterproof leggings and a mackintosh, he said. "Blood on those, too. . . . And some cartridges. You'll have to see if they fit the gun."

"I'm pretty sure they will, sir," McCleod said soberly. "There's pretty well the whole story here. . . . This chap Darnley had some kind of a hold on him. He knew about the will and he held out the prospect of unlimited cash. Bowness needed that, I expect——"

"It's only a matter of time before the business goes bust," the Inspector supplied.

"Well, apparently yesterday he got a note from Darnley telling him that Mark Henstone was going there with Little to destroy the will, and that he must stop them. . . . There was no suggestion of murder, and I don't suppose that suited Darnley at all. . . . But I imagine the young ass took his gun along, and then got excited."

"Darnley?" the Chief Constable said. "Who is he? I don't remember the name in connexion with the case."

"I'm afraid that's what is going to be hard to find out—or at least to prove, sir. . . . No doubt the name is assumed. . . . There's an address here, for Bowness to write to. But I'm inclined to think that he's covered his tracks pretty well. Though, of course, we'll go into it. It's evident that he's been planning this for some time—and he's a clever man——"

"But who?"

The return of the doctor from upstairs saved McCleod

from answering a question which, just at that moment, he was not at all eager to give information about. The doctor's face was grave, and he came to the point immediately.

"He's very bad," he said. "There's a deep wound in the left side. Missed the heart, but got the lung. He's lost a terrific amount of blood, and he's delirious. . . . He'd be better in hospital, but I daren't move him. . . . Looks like a knife wound?"

"It would be, Doctor. . . . Then we can't see him?"

"You can see him—but you can't talk to him. He wouldn't understand if you did. . . . I doubt if he ever will."

McCleod inclined his head in assent.

"But, sir," he said, "if there's any chance of his talking he must. . . . Actually, if he does live, it means hanging or an asylum. But there are innocent people involved. And I want to get the real criminal."

"The real criminal?" the doctor echoed. "But surely——"

"Yes, sir—the man who put him up to it. . . . And the man who killed Henstone." There was an unwonted earnestness in McCleod's manner. "You see, sir, this chap Bowness may be an awful young fool. It's not his fault, entirely, I expect. One of the things I often regret as a policeman is that you see young chaps going this way and can't help it—till you arrest them for something——" He broke off, aware that he was in danger of giving a high horse too free a rein. The doctor eyed him.

"'Is Saul also among the prophets?'" he quoted sardonically. "Well, he shall talk—if he can. . . . Has it ever occurred to you that the other chap—your master criminal—may not be able to help it either?"

With that Parthian shot, he left McCleod to his own devices. On the whole, the rest of the house offered little enough to reward their efforts. Although Bowness had, since his father's illness been practical master of the place,

he seemed to have left little impression upon his surroundings outside the one room which he used downstairs and his bedroom. So far as their present purpose was concerned none of the other rooms contained anything material whatever.

There remained the paint shop. A couple of local detectives were already going through the books when McCleod arrived there apparently without much success. George, who was standing beside and watching them with grim amusement, with occasional facetious comments, looked up as the Inspector entered with distrustful recognition.

"Ah," he said knowingly. "Thought there was something up. . . . Thought you must be one of them. . . . Too nosey, you was. . . . Just a personal matter, eh?"

McCleod put his hand into his pocket. "I'll make one part of it personal, anyhow," he said. "I wonder if you had any luck finding that book?"

"It's not here, sir," one of the detectives volunteered. "They don't go back that far——"

"It isn't, eh?" George said contemptuously. "Where's that ten bob?"

McCleod would have given more than that so as not to waste time. He handed it over. With a knowing smile at the two police officers, he went to a corner of the room, lifted a loose board, and drew from some mysterious recess two ancient-looking volumes.

"Seeing as you are a gentleman, sir," he said, and planked them down on the table. Then he gave a scornful look at the others. "Call yourselves detectives!" he said, and spat.

McCleod was already busy with the first volume. That, apparently, was the wages book, and as he ran his finger down the list of names and payments he nodded once or twice as though he had found something that he expected. But there was a slight frown on his face as he turned to the second book.

This, apparently, gave details of work done on the various

jobs. Old Bowness, apparently, was a careful accountant. Day by day he had put down the number of hours, place, and work done, for all the members of his staff, and he had even compiled an index at the end. About the sixth entry down was the one McCleod sought.

“Broughton House . . . 21.”

He turned to the numbered page. There, sure enough, was the record for which he had been seeking, and almost the first name he found was Little's. Henstone's was also there, but only on a single day, and four or five others. His task, however, was not yet at an end. The one name which he most wanted was missing. Nevertheless, when he left half an hour later, he carried the two worn books under his arm.

CHAPTER XIX

NOT QUITE CLEAR

SUPERINTENDENT CARY lay back in his chair, smoking gloomily as McCleod finished his explanation. The Inspector, whose experience of these things was considerably greater than his own, appeared to be perfectly satisfied with the position. Cary himself was not. It was only after a considerable pause that he spoke.

“So, I suppose, everything's perfectly plain so far as you are concerned?” he said with a trace of sarcasm. “Little killed Henstone—though we don't quite know why—and Bowness killed Little—though one can't see that that did him any earthly good. . . . However, we have got two murders, and two murderers, both dead. So, except that we haven't found the will, everything in the garden is lovely?”

"The will I'm not worried about," McCleod said. "I know to within an inch or two where that is, and I can find it at any time. Also, I'm pretty sure that I know what it's going to say. . . . And there's no great difficulty in finding motives for both Little and Bowness—fortunately."

"All the same," Cary said after another pause, "so far as you've made out the case, there are one or two things which seem a bit doubtful."

McCleod looked at him with an expression of supreme innocence, but there was an odd twinkle in his eye.

"No possible doubt whatever," he replied. "In a Gilbertian sense, of course."

The point of the latter half of his remark was lost on the Superintendent, who was no student of light opera.

"Well, here's one point," he said doggedly. "I suppose that it was Little who wrote to Bowness under the name of Darnley—but it seems to me that one important point which hasn't been established is the proof of Darnley's identity."

"Quite true," McCleod conceded. "That is one difficulty. It is, in fact 'one of the things which is not quite clear'. . . . Darnley was certainly the master mind behind the affair, but 'Darnley' has managed to conceal his identity thoroughly well. That sort of script stuff would hide anyone's identity. And he took the precaution of having his letters sent to a furnished house which he'd rented, but didn't live in. In fact, he only called there at night to collect the letters."

"All the same," Cary said, "someone must know him. The landlord for example——"

"Lives two hundred miles away, and did all the business by letter. 'Darnley' gave Bowness as a reference, and paid six months' rent in advance. There's no hope there. And none of the neighbours can give any real description of him."

"There's another thing. Why did Little use one kind of printing when he wrote to Henstone, and another when he wrote to Bowness and Miss Bramley?"

"That," McCleod said deliberately, "is one of those little points which is better left unexamined for the present—and I sincerely hope you won't raise it when the audience comes. . . . Though, of course, the explanation is simple. He didn't want Henstone to be able to identify him with 'Darnley.'"

The Superintendent wore the dissatisfied air of a man who is partly convinced against his will.

"And I don't see why, if you know where the will is, you haven't made a job of it and brought it here," Cary pursued. "If you're going to tell all this gang all about it, isn't the will and the contents of it the thing which interests them most?"

"Well, hardly. . . . Not being accused of murder obviously interests them most. . . . And it happens to be an essential point of the scheme of things at present that the will should not have been discovered yet, but that I should be in a position to discover it early to-morrow morning."

Cary frowned. I don't see it," he said. "Well—I suppose it's good enough for a Coroner, and you may as well have your own way. After all, it's your case. . . . All I've done is to find a few red herrings—this morning, for example."

"About Wilton having been a ship's doctor and Newley a writer—to connect with Henstone's periods of being a sailor and a journalist? No, I should call that useful spade-work."

Cary could not quite see why. Something in McCleod's manner irritated him considerably, and there still lingered in the back of his mind an uncomfortable feeling of mystification. He grunted disapprovingly; then spoke in explanation.

"In any case, what's the good of having all this gang?"

he said. "It seems to me a silly sort of grandstand play before we're really ready for it."

"As I explained to Mr. Bembridge," McCleod said gravely, "all these unfortunate people have been in a state of considerable mental stress as a result of this affair. It's only right that we should relieve the strain at the earliest possible moment. He entirely agreed with me."

He paused. It was quite obvious that Cary did not agree, but he said nothing. Suddenly McCleod grinned.

"But that's not my actual reason," he said in a changed voice. "The real reason is that I want to pull their legs good and hard—and I want you to help me!"

"What on earth——?" Cary said blankly. "All this you've been telling me——"

"Is like the *Water Babies*—all fun and pretence, so that you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true. . . . I just thought I'd try it out first. . . . Now, if you'll just listen, I'll explain why——"

It was a very uncomfortable little group of people who were awaiting them in the library twenty minutes later. Mark Henstone and Celia were seated defensively together, and the general attitude towards them suggested that everyone was aware of the position of affairs between them, and no one approved. Francis Carlton formed a rival couple with Kathleen Bramley at the other side of the room; Bembridge and Newley sat between them, the former fussily anxious, the latter with his usual solid self-possession. Obviously an uncomfortable silence had descended upon them even before the detectives arrived and the general reception of their entry savoured of relief.

McCleod, without speaking, took up a central position at the table, and placed upon it a pile of papers which he had no intention of using. Cary seated himself beside him in support, noting as he did so that they formed a dividing line between the two camps—Newley, Carlton, and Miss

Bramley on the right hand, Mark, Celia, and Mr. Bembridge on the other. After an impressive pause, McCleod cleared his throat with an unaccustomed nervousness, glanced round the room and began.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that Mr. Bembridge had already told you the reason why you have been asked here to-night. All of you have been put to some anxiety or inconvenience—not to put it more strongly—as a result of Mr. Henstone's death. . . . To put it bluntly, it has been the unpleasant duty of the Superintendent and myself to suspect you all—or rather, to view you all in the light of possible murderers."

Mr. Bembridge looked as if he was on the point of speaking, but the Inspector anticipated him.

"I do not even except you, sir," he said blandly. "There might always be a motive for a solicitor to murder a client; you were familiar with the household arrangements; you might have arrived, and would have been received by Mr. Henstone, if you had come earlier than your appointment, and through the french window instead of the front door. You could have poured in the linament, and, of course, since you wore gloves, you would have left no fingerprints."

Bembridge was obviously taken aback. He muttered something which was probably "Preposterous!" under his breath. McCleod went on.

"There is one other person who has also been the subject of our investigations. . . . I refer to the butler, Higson. . . . I imagine that there will be no objection if he too listens to what we have to say?"

He looked round. Mark Henstone coloured, hesitated, and then spoke.

"I think it would be only fair," he said. Of all the people in the room, he alone was aware of the principal reason for suspecting the butler, apart from the police. "I might say that, if it should turn out that I am my uncle's

heir," he added with a trace of defiance, "I have every intention of keeping Higson."

Superintendent Cary moved across and touched the bell.

"I needn't recapitulate all the points we discovered which might have formed the basis of cases against you," McCleod continued. "But I will just mention a few of the main ones. Mr. Mark Henstone poured out the medicine, and was to be disinherited by the signing of the will. . . . Mr. Carlton added water to the medicine, and had just been dismissed by Mr. James Henstone from the business. . . . Mr. Newley was there while Mr. Henstone was dozing, and there might have been some motive connected with the business. . . . I might say, that we have been into that quite thoroughly, and there seems to be no possibility of it. . . . Mr. Bembridge will confirm that, I think."

The solicitor had recovered his usual manner. He inclined his head gravely.

"When Inspector McCleod consulted me," he said, "I was able to assure him, not only that there was no evidence of anything wrong in connexion with the business, but that there was no possibility of anyone, even Mr. Newley as manager, defrauding Mr. Henstone. . . . My late client was, I might say, a particularly careful man. Being unable to attend to affairs himself as he might have wished, he exercised the greatest precautions. It is only fair to say, that not only is there no suggestion of anything fraudulent, but that there could never have been any successful fraud in the actual business."

Newley smiled, a little grimly. He was thoroughly conversant with James Henstone's precautions, and, in the past, had often enough resented them. As it was, they were convenient. There was a diffident knock at the door, and Higson limped in, pale and obviously discomposed. McCleod pointed to a chair.

"We think it would be better, Mr. Higson, if you heard

what has to be said. . . . If you would please sit down. . . . I was reviewing some points of suspicion against the people present. . . . Mr. Higson, as you know, was the principal witness of the point of who entered Mr. Henstone's room. . . . But, for that very reason, it would have been possible for Mr. Higson to enter the room himself."

Mark was obviously on the point of intervening. McCleod went on a little hurriedly.

"There is one other person who, unfortunately, cannot be present. I refer to Dr. Wilton who could evidently have arranged for the poison to be administered, and could have removed all traces of it. . . . There is no obvious motive for this, and, of course, no suggestion that he did so. But I had to bear every possibility in mind."

He paused for a moment. "From the beginning, however," he continued, "we discovered traces of another person—an unknown person whose fingerprints appeared on the poison bottle. A letter found in Mr. Henstone's private desk confirmed this possibility; but it was not until the events which included the burglary here, and which culminated in the murder at Broughton House that we could find out anything definite about the man. The position now appears to have been this. . . . Little had formerly been employed with Mr. James Henstone, in the firm of Bowness and Son, painters and decorators at Burnbury. He wrote to Mr. Henstone, shortly before his death, and there is at least a suggestion of blackmail in the letter. We have now established definitely that it was he who paid a surreptitious visit to Mr. Henstone that morning, and who handled the poison bottle.

"He had, then, the opportunity. What was the possible motive? First, anyone knowing Mr. Henstone will agree that he was not a likely person to submit to blackmail, if any attempt was made. There may well have been a quarrel, and the murder might have been committed in the heat of the moment. Subsequent events, however, suggest

another explanation. Little might have gathered that Mr. Henstone was on the point of making a will. Realizing the improbability of benefiting in any way from Mr. Henston's generosity, he might have thought he would do better from his heirs.

"At this point I must refer to Mr. Henstone's dying words. For a time we actually thought that they might refer to William Little. In fact they did not. They alluded to an actual will, made under peculiar circumstances, which, though we have not found it yet, we know to be in existence at Broughton House.

"Little approached Mr. Mark Henstone, who was in a very uncomfortable position, offering to discover the will. Mr. Mark Henstone consented, perhaps not realizing that Little was making an attempt to secure a hold over him. At the same time, Little enticed Miss Bramley there with a view to doing the same with her.

"At this point there is a slight obscurity. It would appear, however, that Mr. Jack Bowness, the son of the man for whom Little and Henstone had both worked, became aware of what was happening. He went there, and in the excitement of the moment, killed Little, but was himself wounded. . . . He has since died."

All his hearers had been listening with a rapt attention to the latter part of his speech. With the last sentence, there was something like a sigh.

"The position, then, is this. . . . Little could have killed Mr. Henstone, his character and circumstances are not opposed to his having done so, and he had a motive. He was certainly responsible for taking Mr. Mark Henstone to Broughton House. . . . Although it may never be possible to obtain actual proof, we are now in a position to say with a moral certainty who killed Mr. James Henstone.

"Undoubtedly Bowness killed Little. Apart from other proof, he finally admitted as much when he was dying. Apparently he had been blackmailed by someone, who,

under the circumstances, may be assumed to have been Little, and this suggests a motive for the crime."

"Then—then——" Carlton burst out impulsively, "you mean—you mean we're free? That you don't suspect——?"

"I am making arrangements about the withdrawal of police supervision to-night," McCleod said. "I am afraid that, even to an innocent man, it is inevitably uncomfortable. . . . But it has been a regrettable necessity."

Mr. Bembridge leant forward firmly.

"But the will?" he demanded. "Why has that not been produced?"

"We have not yet found it," McCleod answered. "I believe, however, that it is simply a matter of making a thorough search in the room where Little was murdered—and I think that I have an idea how the search should be conducted. . . . Perhaps, Mr. Bembridge, if you would meet me at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, you would like to be present."

"Of course, it would certainly be desirable," Bembridge agreed with emphasis. "But in the meantime, Inspector, I may take it that adequate precautions for its safety are being taken?"

"We hardly consider that necessary," McCleod said. "And you will understand, sir, that this affair has imposed a considerable strain upon the resources of the local force. I can assure you that the will will not be found by any casual intruder—even if any such person were likely to go there."

McCleod turned to Mark. "You won't be troubled with the police here any more, sir, and I'm sure we're grateful to you and Mr. Higson for making them so comfortable. . . . Of course, there may be one or two details I'd like to ask some of you ladies and gentlemen about still."

No one said anything, but an expression of relief appeared on several faces. Mark's was one of the few which re-

mained gloomy; and Celia's eyes were fixed on the Inspector's face with a bewildered, questioning look which he felt was a little embarrassing. There was quite a long silence. McCleod started to gather his papers together.

"Inspector," Mark said abruptly. "The will—you say that you know that it exists?"

"I am sure it does. I might even say that we know that the man Little was a witness to it."

"But you don't know its provisions?"

"I'm afraid, sir, that it's still wherever Henstone left it. . . . We know, however, the date on which it was made. And to prepare you for any possible disappointment, I must warn you that it was some time before your adoption by Mr. Henstone."

"You mean, in fact, that I don't benefit under it?" Mark asked, and, oddly enough, he did not sound particularly depressed about it.

"The Inspector can hardly say that," Bembridge said quickly. "The will has still to be found. . . . If it exists—and up to date we appear to have no evidence for it except the doubtful word of this man Little—the mere fact that it was made before your appearance in Mr. Henstone's household does not preclude your benefiting under it. It would have been natural for him to make a legacy, say, to his brother, his heirs and assigns. . . . But I think the house should be guarded."

"I'm afraid you must let us decide about that, sir," Cary said. "Of course, you can approach the local inspector, if you like. But, you see, it's outside our area."

Bembridge snorted and seemed on the point of speaking; but did not. Perhaps he reflected that the will, if it existed, was not likely to favour the interests of Mark Henstone, and it was hardly in his interest to insist upon safeguards.

"That, I think, is all," McCleod said after a moment's pause. "I am sure that we are very sorry if we have occasioned any inconvenience to you ladies and gentlemen. . . .

We thought that the least we could do would be to relieve your minds as soon as possible. . . . Good night."

Outside the door, he looked a little anxiously at the Superintendent.

"You think it went down all right?" he asked. "That bit about not guarding Broughton House. . . . I was afraid it was a little obvious."

"It went down," Cary decided. "Hook, line and sinker. . . . Well, there's the bait. . . . It's simply a matter of seeing what the catch is."

CHAPTER XX

A TELEPHONE CALL

THERE was a rather uncomfortable silence in the room as the door closed behind the police. Newley broke it. He laughed with a suggestion of embarrassment, rose to his feet, and went over to Mark, holding out his hand.

"Well, Mark," he said frankly. "It seems I owe you an apology. . . . In the heat of the moment, you'll admit that there was some justification for my thinking——"

Mark accepted the hand a little absently. He had the air of a man trying to remember something.

"Of course," he said. "It was quite natural."

"And, I understand, I've to congratulate you too—on something else," Newley went on, and looked at Celía, who coloured. "I don't know what your plans are, exactly. . . . In fact, until this wretched will is found, I suppose we don't any of us know our plans. . . . But if I am manager of the business, and you need a job——"

Francis Carlton broke in as he hesitated a little uncertainly.

"I say, Mark, I'm sorry too," he said and looked at Kathleen Bramley. "In fact, we both are. . . . And I'm awfully glad——"

But Mark had suddenly succeeded in recapturing the idea which had been elusively flitting in the back of his mind.

"That's it!" he said suddenly. "I say . . . Newley, doesn't the name Bowness bring something back to you? I seem to remember my uncle saying something—and you were there——"

Newley laughed a little constrainedly. "Yes, perhaps," he said. "But there were a good many things about your uncle, Mark, which I put in a good deal of time forgetting—and which, if I may say so, are best not mentioned more than one can help——"

His casual glance round was not without a suggestion of warning and it finally rested on Higson, who had been standing awaiting his dismissal. The butler caught his eye and came forward.

"Will there be anything further, sir?" he asked, and then in a different voice. "And, and—thank you, sir."

"That's all right, Higson. . . . No, there's nothing more——"

Bembridge seemed to think it was time he took a hand. As the butler departed, he rose to his feet and advanced.

"I can't say how glad I am, my boy," he said, not without emotion. "Of course, I never doubted—— But——" He broke off a little dubiously, perhaps recollecting a previous conversation. "As regards this supposed will," he went on a little more briskly, "I shouldn't worry about that too much, Mark. After all, it may not be found. And if it is found, quite possibly it is not in order. From what the Inspector said to me, he appears to think that it is a highly irregular document. . . . Perhaps we shall know to-morrow."

"Perhaps." Newley yawned. "And in the meantime,

I'm not used to missing so much sleep as I did last night. . . . Besides, I expect Mark will be glad to get rid of us——"

He glanced a little meaningly at Celia Vernon, who had not said a word. About the situation there was all the usual embarrassment which accompanies the first introduction of bride-to-be to her future husband's relatives, and there were in addition other factors which made it overwhelming. She could barely rake up enough voice to respond to the chorus of leave-takings which succeeded as the others took the manager's hint, and even when the door had closed behind the last of them she stood there with an odd feeling of constraint. Mark went over to her side, and took her hand.

"Celia——" he said softly. "Celia——"

But the girl did not respond. She withdrew her hand and turned to face him, and there was an anxious look in her eyes.

"Mark," she said slowly. "Mark . . . There's something wrong——"

"Wrong?" He echoed the word in amazement. "Why——?"

"There's something wrong—about all this. . . . Did you believe him?"

"Who?"

"Inspector—Inspector McCleod. . . . Mark, it simply wasn't true. Of course, you can't tell anything from his face. . . . But I know it was all lies. . . . At least, that there was something behind it——"

Mark laughed. "Celia darling," he said, "surely you're letting the whole business get on your nerves. . . . It was a perfectly reasonable explanation that he gave——"

"Why did he give it?"

"Well—I don't know. . . . After all, they have kept us all rather on edge, haven't they? We've all been worried. . . . It was only decent on his part to tell us."

Celia shook her head, but said nothing.

"After all, why else should he have told us?" Mark persisted.

"I think——" Celia said, and stopped. Then she looked up defiantly. "I'm sure it was a trap."

"But that's absurd. . . . Who was there to trap? He can't find out any more about me. Bowness has confessed to Little's murder——"

"I don't know," she admitted a little uncertainly. "Only——only I'm sure there was something. . . . Why hasn't he found the will?"

"Probably wants to look by daylight. . . . After all, they've searched the place once. It must be somewhere well hidden——"

"But he practically said that he knows where it is."

"Probably he's only just thought of it. . . . And in any case, the will isn't his main object. If he's solved the murders——"

Plainly she was unconvinced, and at the mention of the will a slight frown creased her brows.

"Mark," she said after a pause. "Mark—you remember—when you asked me to marry you——?"

He laughed. "I know men are supposed to forget these details," he said jokingly. "But I've only had since this morning to do it in!"

"Mark, I refused you—when I thought that you were going to have your uncle's money. . . . Mark, if this will does—or if there isn't a will—I don't think I could face it——"

"But—but, Celia—— What do you mean?"

"Mark. . . . I can't help it. . . . I've got some pride, and I couldn't bear to have people think that I married you, after a day or two's acquaintance, simply because you were rich. . . . They would think so. . . . I believe Newley thought so to-night——"

"Why, that's absurd. . . . He seemed to me quite decent. I mean offering me a job, if he could and so on——" He

stopped. "After all, I shall probably need that job," he said after a pause. "You see, Celia, you're worrying yourself quite unnecessarily. McCleod seems convinced that there is a will, and if there is, it seems pretty certain that I'm not the person who benefits under it. . . . But there's a good chance that, whoever gets the business, Newley will be manager, and if he is, it might be a big help if he's ready to give me any kind of a start. . . . I think that it's jolly good of him."

"I don't know. . . . I don't like him."

"But that's absurd, darling——" Mark began with a trace of exasperation in his voice. "Besides, I shall just have to take whatever there is. . . . It's utterly ridiculous. If I do benefit under the will and am able to marry, you say that you won't marry me; and if I don't——"

The telephone bell rang sharply. It was perhaps as well, for the strain which they had both undergone was rapidly leading to a situation perilously near a quarrel. Mark crossed the room and lifted the receiver.

"Hullo!" he said and waited. Then an expression of slight surprise crossed his face. "Oh, that's you . . . Yes . . . What is it? The will——?"

Celia was by his side in a moment. She could hear the unintelligible cackling noises of the instrument. Mark was replying mostly in monosyllables which told her nothing. His face had assumed that wooden mask which had been habitual before his uncle's death, and she was only too well aware that, at that particular moment, she could hope to do nothing with him.

It became apparent that the speaker at the other end of the line, whoever it might be, was explaining something at considerable length. Occasionally Mark would murmur a brief word of assent, or put a brief question. It seemed as though they would go on like that for ever. Celia could not tell in the least what it was about, but she was sure that it was something serious.

"Right," Mark said at last. "I quite agree with you. . . . I'll come at once. . . . You'll be waiting with the car. . . . All right."

He put back the receiver. Then for a moment he stood thinking and for a space it seemed that he had completely forgotten her existence. She laid her hand on his arm, and he looked at her with a start.

"Mark! Mark, what is it?"

He came to himself with a start. For a second it seemed as if he were not going to answer her question; then he thought better of it.

"It's the will," he said. "That was——" He stopped. "That was a friend who wants to help me. He's just remembered something my uncle said. He's pretty sure he knows where the will is, and he says that Inspector McCleod's barking up the wrong tree altogether."

He paused. Celia waited for him to go on, but he did not.

"But—but he wanted you to do something?" she said at last. "And you consented?"

"We're going to find it to-night. . . . It will be perfectly easy. Now that the police guard has gone—— He's meeting me with a car in ten minutes."

She stared at him with anxious eyes, and her misgivings returned to her in a flood.

"But—Mark—— You won't go—to-night?"

"Why not? It's obviously my chance to settle things. The sooner it's found the better. Surely you can see that?" He looked at her with a desperate kind of appeal in his eyes. "I can't stand this uncertainty any longer. If it's found, I shall know definitely, one way or the other——"

"But—but there's some trick. . . . Mark, I'm sure that there's something wrong. . . . I don't know what it is. But I'm sure that there's danger to you."

"Celia, I must go," Mark said decisively.

"But isn't it obvious that there's something queer about it? Can't you see that whoever it is has simply waited until the police were withdrawn to lure you out—Where is it?"

Mark was silent.

"Mark, who was speaking?"

There was still no answer. He stood looking at her stonily.

"Be sensible, Mark," she pleaded. "If you think anything must be done to-night, ring the police. Get in touch with the Inspector, and tell him that you're going——"

"There's no risk," he said impatiently. "It isn't as if there was anything to fear from the police now. There's no need for anyone to know about it until we've succeeded."

"There might be trouble, if they don't know. . . . But it wasn't the police I was thinking of. . . . I'm sure someone wants to harm you."

"There's no reason why anyone should. . . . And both Little and Bowness are dead."

Celia made a last desperate effort. She laid a hand on his arm as he turned towards the door.

"Mark, you mustn't go. . . . If you—if you care for me at all, I beg you not to."

"It's just because I do care for you that I'm going," he said, facing her squarely. "Things can't go on like this . . . As they have done to-night. I've got to settle things one way or the other—whether you'll marry me or not."

"But, Mark, I will marry you—whatever happens. . . . Can't you understand how I was feeling—after those people——"

He was already moving towards the door. She stood there, half expecting him to look round, but he did not. The door closed behind him.

For a moment she just stood there. The thought of the telephone crossed her mind. She could ring McCleod and

the police. They would follow him or intercept him. It was the fear that Inspector McCleod in his explanation of the murders had been setting a trap deliberately that restrained her. All at once the whole plan seemed to be clear to her. McCleod had intentionally made it clear that all the police who had been watching them had been withdrawn. His statement about the murders had been a mere invention, intended to make one of the suspects do something suspicious. And it had succeeded—with Mark, the person against whom the strongest case of all existed. If they followed him, she might be responsible for their surprising him in some hopelessly compromising situation. She dare not call them. She must stop him herself.

In the instant she was hurrying across the room and in the passage she broke into a run. Mark had a minute or two the advantage, and he was walking quickly. He had nearly reached the gate before she overtook him. He turned at the sound of her steps.

"Celia!" he exclaimed. "You mustn't——"

"If you're going, Mark," she said determinedly. "I'm going too." She saw the refusal in his face and hurried on. "As you said, there's no risk. It will be all to the good if there's another witness. And if you don't let me, I shall follow you anyhow. . . . But I shall ring the police first, and tell them. Perhaps they'll stop you from going altogether. . . . I don't care. I'm coming with you."

Her face was flushed and she was breathing a little more quickly than usual. He frowned at her for a moment.

"Very well," he said. "We'll go together."

Without another word he led the way through the gates. They turned to the left, walking in an oppressive silence. Not a word was spoken until they had reached the turning down which Mark had gone for his appointment with Little. Celia shivered at the thought. And just as they reached it, a saloon car rounded the bend and drew up beside them.

CHAPTER XXI

WATCH BY NIGHT

SUPERINTENDENT CARY shifted his position for about the hundredth time and swore mildly beneath his breath. He was not at all happy about what they were doing; indeed, it had taken all McCleod's persuasive powers to convince him that, after all, it was the logical and only thing to do. Strictly speaking, they had solved the problem which the murders presented, in spite of all the complications which had been encountered. And yet, there remained that gap—the difficulty of proving to the satisfaction of a judge and jury, and in the face of a defending barrister's cross-examination, that James Henstone's murderer was Darnley, the blackmailer of Little's murderer.

That was why the Superintendent was waiting, uncomfortably, in a damp laurel bush in the shrubbery of Broughton House, in the hope of someone arriving who would provide the necessary link. Without it, they could prove no reasonable motive for the murder, and though it has frequently been said that the proof of motive for a crime is not an indispensable part of a case, short of an actual eye-witness, a jury generally likes to be sure why anyone should have committed a crime. Besides, so far they had failed completely to clear any suspects. If anything, they had added to their list, and with so many people behaving in an unreasonable manner, there was no saying what might be made of it.

He stared again towards the house. This time they were taking no chances whatever. Broughton House was as completely surrounded as any place well could be. Once the murderer was inside, he would certainly not be able to get out, and they could watch him. Unfortunately, he was not yet in. The dark pile of the building loomed

ahead of him with all the appearance of being as completely deserted as it had been for twenty years previous to James Henstone's death.

With a start he turned as something touched his arm. Then McCleod's whisper reassured him.

"Quiet! He's coming at last—or someone is!"

Cary would never have believed that anyone could have approached so silently. He had not heard a sound as his colleague approached, and in view of the darkness of the night, it was only to be hoped that the murderer was not equally light-footed. His lips barely shaped the question.

"In the lane now. . . . Listen."

The Superintendent had not his companion's quick ears. It was a minute or two before he heard the soft grating of gravel which was all that indicated the murderer's approach. It was coming nearer; the man must have passed the gate. Then a faint moving shadow came into view, passed them, and stopped a little short of the house.

There was no sound of movement now. The man had taken to the grass. But for the fact that he knew perfectly well that if their quarry moved out of their sight he must be seen by another watcher, Cary would have been worried. For the stranger was moving round the corner of the house. Then, for a little there was silence. He turned rather anxiously towards McCleod, and in doing so his feet made a faint rustling in the laurel leaves.

"Quiet," McCleod begged. "Doing a tour of the house. . . . Back in a minute."

A twig snapped sharply on their left, sounding unusually loudly in the stillness. Then the shadow came into view again, slowly advancing until it reached a point opposite their hiding place. Cary waited for the sound of the opening window which would be the sign that they had correctly forecast the other's intentions. Instead, to their surprise, there came the soft hooting of an owl.

"Tooo-whit! Tooo-whit—Tooo-whit!"

It was surprisingly life-like. But for the fact that the person who gave the call was within three yards of them, they would never have known that it came from a human throat. Obviously it must be some kind of signal, but it passed the comprehension of both of them for whom the signal could be intended. They had not long to wait. There was the sound of footsteps again, this time less silent; in a minute, two shadows had joined the first, and the three together coalesced into the black bulk of the building. There was an unintelligible whisper; and then the sound of the opening window. After what seemed a long time, it closed again.

Cary drew a deep breath. For the past few minutes, he had hardly dared to breathe at all.

"Who on earth——?" he muttered. "Is he making a party of it?"

"Lord knows," McCleod breathed in answer. "Come on."

It would have been better, perhaps, if it could have been arranged to have watched actually inside the house itself. Unfortunately, the arrangement of the kitchen premises made this impossible. There were men in the house, ready to intervene at a signal to be given by the firing of Cary's revolver—a weapon which he was sincerely trusting he would not have to use for anything more dangerous. For the actual watching, they had contrived convenient spy-holes in the shutter, through which the vital wall could be seen. But as they crept round, Cary was wondering whether this was the best possible plan. They must catch the other in the very act of destroying the will; on the other hand, obviously there would be trouble if he succeeded in doing so. To stop him in time, they had to rely on the police in the house, and their prompt response to Cary's gun; for the kitchen windows themselves were heavily barred. It might, Cary was thinking, have been better to remove the bars and make their dash

through the window itself—— His thoughts broke off suddenly at a whispered word from McCleod.

“Here!”

Cary himself could not have told where they were. Feeling with his hand, he found first the shutter, and then the spyhole. He looked through. Inside all was dark. Apparently they had come too soon. But where had the three people got to? A horrible doubt was beginning to take hold of his mind. And then a light showed all at once, as though a door had been thrown open. Two huge shadows appeared for an instant on the opposite wall, and in spite of himself, Cary gasped. One of them was a woman. A moment later, Mark and Celia appeared in full view.

Neither of them was carrying the light. Presumably that was the third, and, as they believed, the vital person; for the shadows shifted as though someone was moving about with it in his hand. Then it steadied and it seemed to the Superintendent that he caught the sound of a door opening. Mark and the girl stood motionless; Mark with the peculiar expressionless look which had so struck Cary on his first seeing him, Celia obviously frightened. He caught the sound of a tap running; then for the first time the third of the trio came into view. It was Newley.

In one hand he carried a bucket of water. In the other, there was a painter's brush, of the kind that is used for distempering, and an instrument which, for a moment, Cary thought was the same as that which had been found on Little. He set the bucket down, placed the scraper on the table nearby, and dipped the brush in the water. Then, with a gesture to Mark as if he was explaining something, he moved the brush up and down several times on the wall-paper, dipped it again and repeated the process before handing the brush to Mark with a smile of invitation.

A sudden light came to Cary. He was not a particularly handy man about the house, having for most of the years

of his married life worked on the principle that, if one did not do things well, one had not got to do them. But he dimly remembered an occasion when, under the strenuous persuasion of a sister-in-law, he had been enticed into helping to repaper a room. That was what they were going to do then! They were stripping the paper off the wall.

"Good Lord!" he could not repress the whisper to his companion. "Then it's under the wall-paper?"

He heard McCleod give what seemed to be a noiseless chuckle. Mark was warming to his work now, and Newley, who stood by smoking a cigarette, at last seemed to give his approval. He picked up the instrument from the table and approached the wall. Steadying it with the fingers of his left hand, he pressed firmly and pushed it forward. Under the blade, a white strip of clean plaster showed, increasing as he repeated the movement.

And yet, it was not quite white. Newley stepped back with a laugh which had a suggestion of triumph about it, and handed the scraper to Mark as if inviting him to try his hand. For a moment, they had a clear view of the bare space of plaster, and it was only a yard or two away. But it was not bare. There were marks upon it—red marks. And it suddenly flashed upon the Superintendent's mind that they formed letters. He strained his eyes to see, and made out quite clearly, a little above the two scars made by Bowness's revolver shots, two or three words outlined clearly on the white surface.

"—ast will and testament of me, Jame——"

Mark bent to his task, with the girl standing just behind him, watching in fascinated interest. And then it was borne home abruptly to Cary that this was all wrong. If McCleod's theory was right, it was Newley's scheme to destroy the will unread. But here he was actually helping Mark Henstone to find it! He turned to McCleod and whispered.

"I say . . . What's up . . . ? Why——"

"I don't know," McCleod answered, and there seemed to be a trace of disquiet in the words. "I thought——"

"What do we do?"

"Wait. . . . Have that gun ready, for God's sake!"

For the moment, Cary had forgotten all about the revolver; though he had been painfully aware of its awkward contours in his hip pocket all that evening until then. He lugged it out and stood waiting with it in his raised hand, his finger on the trigger.

But there was nothing alarming about the business. Mark was making, for an amateur, excellent progress, in spite of the care with which he was working. The top half of the will was clear now. He could read occasional words when Mark straightened his back.

"Will and bequeath to my friend and emp——" Then, exasperatingly, Mark's head got in the way. "All my goods, real and person——"

He was trying to make it out in the odd glimpses which Mark's movements allowed him when he felt McCleod touch his arm.

"Can you see him?" came a whisper. "He's gone!"

It was only then that Cary realized for the first time that Newley was no longer an admiring spectator. At some period when the Superintendent's attention was concentrated on the wall he must have stepped back out of sight. And yet he had not crossed the room to the door leading towards the passage. They must have seen him. Perhaps he was standing just out of sight beside the window. Perhaps, for some reason, he had gone into the scullery. But there was nothing to worry about in that. The scullery windows, like those of the kitchen, were strongly barred; and on both lots of windows Cary had himself seen affixed that morning a strong padlock—on the inside indeed, but to which the manager could have no key.

"The scullery?" he breathed to McCleod. "Why——?"

"For God's sake be ready! When he comes back——"

There was a tenseness in McCleod's voice that Cary had never heard before. "When I give the word . . . It may be life and death. . . ."

At the words, the full extent of the risk they were taking came home to Cary. If Newley was the murderer, and their view of what the wall would show was correct, there could only be one course of action open to him. There could only be one reason for the presence of Mark and the girl in that house at such an hour. They were never meant to leave it. Already once a murderer, Newley had nothing to lose. And by it he might gain safety. His finger almost tightened on the trigger at the thought of what might happen. And yet, perhaps there was some mistake. Perhaps Newley was not guilty, and after all was only engaged in the discovery of the will. He had done nothing yet which could possibly convict him—Cary hesitated. A whisper reached him.

"Wait!" Then McCleod drew a deep breath. "Ah——!"

Newley had emerged into view again. He seemed to be carrying something in his left hand, but it was not raised in any threatening manner. What it was, his closeness to the window did not allow the watchers to see. But apparently there was no need for alarm. Mark turned as though in answer to some remark. There was a curious expression on his face, half-pleased and half-regretful. He pointed to the wall, where the will was now more than half visible. Newley nodded in answer; then seemed to listen, and crossed the room towards the outer door.

Even then the accident of his position hid his burden from Cary's sight, though evidently it was some object of fair bulk. Not until he turned to go through the door was its nature plain. It was a large can, of the kind which is used for oil. But it was without comprehension that he saw it. Only when he raised his eyes to the manager's face and saw the expression of savage triumph upon it did he understand. Then the door closed.

"Now!"

McCleod's tense whisper came on the instant. Cary tugged at the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled again, desperately——

"Safety catch——!" came a fierce whisper.

Even as McCleod snatched the gun, from inside there came a dull crash as of something falling. It was drowned in an instant by the shot; but before the echo had died away, before he had any chance to move, he noticed something else. From beneath the closed door trickled a puff of smoke, which, even as he looked, turned to a river of blue flame. And then the full horror of the situation dawned upon him. He turned to McCleod with a desperate exclamation.

"My God! They're locked in! The windows——"

"Yes," McCleod said very quietly. "We've got about four minutes to get them out . . . Quick!"

CHAPTER XXII

ORDEAL BY FIRE

As the door closed behind the manager, Celia Vernon really came to herself for the first time that evening since McCleod's explanation. The journey had been a horrible nightmare. It was with something near to horror that she had learnt that Newley was to be their conductor, and if there was one thing which could have added to her premonition of approaching evil, it was the revelation that their destination was Broughton House. Throughout the whole journey Mark had hardly uttered a word, and he had stopped her own efforts at conversation so decisively that at last she had abandoned the attempt.

But there had seemed no ground for any fear. Newley was, if anything, more pleasant in his manner than she had previously found him, and if he prolonged their mystification to an exasperating degree it was with an air of enjoying an innocent triumph that almost made one forgive him. And then, in the excitement of finding the will, she had almost forgotten the manager's existence. She had eyes only for the ribbons of letters which the scraper steadily revealed on the wall as the paper slid off with surprising ease; and for Mark's face as he uncovered them. For on the uncovering of the name of Harry Bowness as legatee he had given one queer look of triumph at Celia, and then bent to the completion of his task.

It was mere chance that she glanced up as Newley closed the door, and it was his face which warned her. Mark had almost finished on one side.

"Witnessed this day in the presence of the testator and of each other——"

"Mark!" Without quite knowing the reason for her fear, she gripped his arm. And as she did so, there came to their ears the click of the key turned in the lock.

"What——?" Mark's eyes met hers in bewilderment. "Why——?"

Realization burst upon her suddenly. She recalled the oil can in the manager's hand. He had brought it from the scullery on what was now the plainly ridiculous excuse that they would probably need some more water before they could finish the paper.

"Mark," she said quite quietly. "We—we're trapped. He's going to burn the house."

Mark stared at her for a moment in stunned amazement.

"Don't you understand? . . . He's the murderer. . . . For some reason he wants you out of the way. He's brought you here—Quick!"

Outside there was a crash; then the tinkling of shattered glass. The sound of a dull explosion followed almost

instantly. Mark rushed towards the door, but he never reached it. Before he could do so, a thin wave of flame spread through the crack; then reached in a blue cloud towards them, and they caught the reck of petrol. Mark recoiled, rubbing at his singed eyebrows.

"Quick," he said, "the windows——"

And then he stopped. It had been Newley himself who had drawn their attention to the idiocy of the police in padlocking windows which were already guarded by iron bars, and ignoring the means of entrance which they had actually used. He looked desperately at the heavy shutters; then his eyes searched the room.

But there was nothing—not even a poker in the rusty grate. It was in mere desperation that he seized one of the rickety chairs and started to batter hopelessly at the heavy woodwork.

The room was filling with smoke. Mark hammered at the padlock between bursts of coughing; but it showed no signs of yielding. In the end it was the chair which gave, collapsing into a heap of firewood in his hands. He looked round with smarting eyes. In front of the door the fiery lake had spread, and was licking at the edge of the kitchen table; the door was already ablaze. Celia had sunk down on the settee at the side of the fireplace, with her handkerchief pressed to her mouth and nose. Through the thickening haze he groped for and found the largest fragment of the chair, fruitlessly endeavouring to find a crack into which he could insert the end to use it as a lever. Once he obtained some purchase, but the worm-eaten timber gave as soon as he exerted any pressure. Gasping for breath, he turned in despair to find the girl stumbling towards him.

"Celia . . ." he gasped. "I'm afraid—I'm afraid it's no good. . . . I'm sorry. . . . I should never have come. . . . Never have let you come——"

"Mark," Celia said simply, and his arm went about her.

Their lips met as the crackle of burning wood showed that the table itself had caught.

They clung to each other, momentarily regardless of the stifling air, and the growing roar of the fire outside. Mark looked down at the pale face which pressed against his shoulder. Her eyes were closed, but there was an expression of strange happiness upon her face.

"Celia," he said huskily, "I've brought you to this. . . . We're going to die together here. . . . But it was because I did love you that I had to go—because I couldn't bear the idea of losing you——"

"I know, Mark," she said, and the words were hardly audible. "And I love you—— Even this——"

There was a crash and a tinkle right beside them. Fragments of glass cascaded in a thin stream through the shutters and fell to the floor at their feet. They heard McCleod's voice.

"Mr. Henstone! Miss Vernon! . . . You're all right?"

"Here!" Mark shouted. "But be quick—— The fire——"

"We're trying to smash the windows. . . . We'll have you out—one way or another—in time. . . . Don't be frightened——"

There was a thunderous battering on the shutters. But the solid wood showed no signs of giving way. A crack showed at one corner; in one or two places a white splinter flew from the boards; but they still held. Mark realized that the police must be finding it hard to strike any effective blow. Probably they had no effective tools. Eventually, no doubt, the woodwork would yield to their efforts, but would it be in time? The smoke in the room was thickening to such an extent that the flames themselves showed as a dull, murky glow. Only the little air which penetrated through the cracks of the shutters enabled them to breathe at all. And then with a pang of sheer hopelessness he remembered the bars.

The blows on the woodwork ceased. It seemed that

the rescuers themselves had realized the uselessness of their efforts. Celia gave a little sigh, and he felt himself supporting her weight in his arms.

"Stand away, inside. . . . Stand away from the window!

A shout sounded from outside. Then something struck the window, with a terrific crash as the glass shattered and tinkled to the floor. At the next blow the padlock visibly loosened; at the third it rattled to the floor. The shutter flew back, letting in a rush of cool night air.

"Mr. Henstone! Mr. Henstone!"

He recognized McCleod's voice, and gulping in the reviving stream managed to reply.

"Here . . . Hurry. . . ."

"Stand back, sir!"

The iron bars still prevented any passage. As blow after blow sounded upon them without appreciable effect, Mark began to lose hope. He could hear other voices, apparently in the passage outside. There was a moment's lull in the battering at the window.

"Hurry!" Mark croaked through the thickening air. "We can't stand much——"

Then he saw that they were trying new tactics. From somewhere a ladder had been procured. Using it as a gigantic lever, they were attempting to dislodge a bar in an outward direction. He saw the stout iron bend; then with a crack the fastening gave at the bottom. He pushed the half-unconscious girl forward as a head and shoulders appeared in the opening. It was with difficulty that he could raise her. He felt his own senses leaving him. Then the weight was taken from his arms. His last scrap of resolution deserted him, and he sank unconscious to the floor, just as McCleod dropped through the window to his side.

It must have been some time later that he regained any knowledge of his surroundings. His first impression was that the burning, intolerable sensation in his nose and

throat had ceased; then something cool and damp pressed against his forehead. He opened his eyes to see Celia bending over him, and there were tears in her eyes. With an effort he sat up. Through his smoke-bleared eyes he could make out, beyond the radiance of the torch which shone upon them, the windows of the house, lit by a weird, flickering light. Abruptly it came back to him. He gripped the hand which was raised in the act of sponging his forehead.

"Celia," he said thickly. "They—you—you're safe. . . ."

"Quite safe, Mark. . . . Lie still a little——"

Voices were calling from the darkness. A black group of silhouettes obscured for a moment the wavering glow of the windows.

"Inspector! Inspector McCleod!"

"Here!"

The voice answered from just above him. For the first time he became aware that it was McCleod who had been holding the torch. He struggled to his feet as the new arrivals came within range of the torch, and then he saw who the central figure of the group was.

Newley had evidently been in the fire which he himself had kindled. Above his smoke-blackened face, on one side the hair had been frizzled away almost to the skin and the shoulder of his coat was scorched through. But he met their eyes defiantly and even managed a wolfish grin as he saw the girl and Mark standing together.

"So you got out," he said grimly. "I'd not counted on this—this reception committee. . . . I should have known——"

"Mr. Newley," McCleod broke in. "I have to charge you with the attempted murder of Mark Henstone and Celia Vernon. . . . You may make a statement if you wish, but I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing, and may be used as evidence at your trial. . . . I should also warn you, sir, that further charges will probably be preferred against you——"

"It's hardly worth while my saying anything," Newley said, and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't suppose you'd believe any account I made up of this little accident, eh?" He looked at Mark. "Sorry, and all that," he said. "It was a case of regrettable necessity. When you started remembering at the wrong time, you know. . . . As for old Henstone, I regard myself as a public benefactor——It's no use saying anything."

McCleod jerked his head in the direction of the road. As the police on each side of him led him towards the waiting car, Celia broke into dry, convulsive sobs.

"That's all right, Miss Vernon." Cary's voice sounded in rough comfort. "He deserves what he'll get. Henstone's poisoning was planned, cold-blooded murder for money; he tried to burn you and Mr. Mark to death. . . . No use wasting tears on him. . . . You'd better get along home. I've a man who can drive you, if you want. We'll have your statement later——"

"The fire——" Mark glanced back towards the house. Volumes of smoke were still pouring out of the broken window; but the flickering light had vanished, giving place to the flashing of torches. "The will——" he said. "I found it. . . . On the kitchen wall——"

"I know, sir," McCleod said soothingly. "I found it myself this evening. . . . What neither Little nor Newley seem to have noticed was that the damp had loosened that strip between the cupboards. It peeled off in a lump quite easily. . . . I stuck it back."

"Then——then you know——"

"That old Bowness was the legatee under that will? Yes. I'd guessed it even before. . . . But I'm afraid he won't inherit."

"You mean——?" Mark asked. "Surely the will is in order. . . . And the fire——"

"The fire's practically out. . . . It would have been a nice little blaze in a few more minutes. He'd evidently

spotted the can of spirit when we were here before. But, of course, he hadn't reckoned on a whole posse of police ready to deal with it in the first few minutes. The house was too damp to catch well, and they smothered the blaze——"

"But—but the will——?" Mark asked.

A grim smile flickered round McCleod's lips and vanished.

"I hope to get it out intact as an exhibit—later on," he said. "But it can't be proved. You hadn't quite finished uncovering it, sir. Where Henstone's signature should be, There's nothing but a hole."

"You mean—it was never signed?"

"I mean that we shall never know whether it was signed or not—legally speaking. . . . It's a queer sort of joke, but that's the particular spot where young Bowness's bullets struck last night!" He paused to let the fact sink in. "And both the witnesses being dead——"

"Both?" It was Cary who echoed the word. "Why, I thought Newley must have been one?"

"Not one of the two who signed. . . . What he'd done was to draw up the will on the wall. . . . You misunderstood the word 'writer' by the way. It didn't mean he was an author. It meant he was a sign-writer. . . . Of course, if it had been in Scotland, it might have had a legal meaning. . . . That's where he learnt to write script——"

Cary was puzzled. "But, in that case, why on earth should he want to destroy it?" he asked. "Of course, I can see that with young Bowness dead he couldn't hope to get the money. . . . But it might never have come to light at all—and he took a big risk in coming here——"

"I'd given him a pretty broad hint that I was on the point of finding it. . . . And it would have given him away—because he'd put his signature in the form of the fingerprints of his right hand just below the will. But there was another reason too. It was obviously better for

him that Mark should inherit, leaving him to manage the business, than that there should be the uncertainty of old Bowness."

"But—but the will must stand?" Mark asked. "If you can prove all that——?"

"I very much doubt it. . . . But you'd better ask Mr. Bembridge. . . . If Bowness's executors fight, there might be a nice little case. . . . On the whole, though, sir, I should say that the estate would go to you."

"But—but I can't——" Mark began desperately, and there was an anxiety to disinherit himself in his voice which made McCleod raise his eyebrows in surprise. "The money can't be mine. . . . I won't take it——"

"Well, sir," McCleod said. "I should sleep on it, and see."

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCLUSION

MCCLEOD and Cary had had a busy and exasperating day clearing up odds and ends before at last they managed to find half an hour to sit down over a cup of tea late in the afternoon of the following day. It was not until after the second cup that either man found the energy to break the silence; then McCleod sighed.

"Almost a pity he confessed," he said in answer to Cary's look of inquiry. "I'm certain we should have got him without."

"Best thing he could do," Cary rejoined. "Saves everyone a lot of trouble. . . . After all, he hadn't any defence against arson and attempted murder, so he couldn't have missed a long stretch. . . . As for Henstone's murder, I'm not so sure. . . . Too many complications."

"Perhaps. Such as?"

"Well, all those people who'd messed about with the medicine," Cary said slowly. "We could never have proved when the poison was put in the glass."

"Actually, that's one of the points we can prove . . . I tried it out this morning . . . We know to within a few minutes, anyhow."

"What?" Cary demanded. "How on earth could we? Unless you've found an eye-witness——"

McCleod smiled queerly. "Eye-witness?" he repeated. "Well, that's a good word for it. . . . Only it's not a living one."

"What on earth do you mean? Who is it?"

"You might say Henstone himself." He smiled. "And I hope to put it in evidence too!"

Cary grunted. "I don't think assize judges set much stock by séances," he suggested.

"No. . . . But I'm quite serious. . . . You remember those photos Carlton brought?"

"The proofs? Well?"

"Well, Carlton brought them. When he left, Henstone must have looked them over. On Newley's own evidence he took them from him and put them on the table. Not being a photographer, he didn't realize they weren't fixed, and laid them down sensitive side up. They stayed like that until Kathleen Bramley turned them over just after eleven."

"I know that. . . . But I don't see."

"You remember the top one was fogged? With a lighter patch on it, as if something semi-transparent had rested there?"

Cary nodded, still obviously unenlightened.

"And you may remember that, of the patch, one part was a little darker than the rest . . . ? Well, that was the shadow of Henstone's medicine glass. . . . And the darker patch shows where Newley put the poison in after the

paper had been exposed to the light for a little. . . . I can assure you that I've tried it out. Of course, I can't guarantee the light this morning was exactly the same. But it worked out approximately to the time immediately before Newley left. Look . . . That's the original portrait. . . . And that's the one I made."

Cary took the two prints, looked at them, and shook his head dubiously.

"It's ingenious," he admitted, "but——"

"We've Newley's own statement he put them there. We know they were the other way up just after eleven. . . . It's conclusive, really."

"Maybe. . . . But it's the kind of thing juries don't believe." He paused. "Just when did you begin to get your eye on Newley?" he asked at last.

"I don't quite know. I must say that I regarded him with acute suspicion, as soon as I found his fingerprints weren't on the glass or either bottle. . . . That made him quite an exception in that gang!"

Cary grinned. "No doubt. . . . And his absence of a motive was pretty damning, too, I suppose?"

"Actually, I thought at first he might have one. I mean, that he'd had almost complete control of Henstone's business affairs for some time, and there was always the possibility that he might have done a little swindling. . . . But when I'd spoken to Bembridge about that I was pretty sure he couldn't have done. Henstone was a lot too careful for that. So that left me in the air again——"

"But strengthened your suspicions?" Cary interposed with some sarcasm. "And if he'd proved an alibi, I suppose you'd have charged him at once."

"It didn't strengthen them immediately. But it did later on. Especially after Broughton House, it became pretty clear that it wasn't just something done on the spur of the moment. It was actually planned, and the intention was to put suspicion on Mark."

"You mean that he deliberately tried to get Mark hanged?"

"I'm afraid so. . . . You see, someone must have done it, and he didn't think he could get it dismissed as accident or suicide. So the great thing was to get someone found guilty soon, in case anything came to light by accident."

"But—Good Lord!" Cary was genuinely shocked.

"He's not a man with many scruples. . . . Carlton was the first complication—because the case against him was just as good. But Newley couldn't have reckoned on that, or how good a case it would be. . . . And, of course, he couldn't foresee Kathleen Bramley, or Little, or Higson's criminal past. Any one of them might have been helpful. With the whole lot, it was a case of *embarras des richesses*."

"But Little?" Cary suggested. "Weren't they working together?"

"Certainly not at first. . . . I'm pretty certain that neither had any idea of the other's presence in the neighbourhood, until Little looked through the window that night, and caught Newley trying to find the letter Little had sent."

"That was why he came then?"

"It was. He'd heard of the letter, but he didn't know what was in it. The desk was too tough, and he had to leave in a hurry. . . . But, you see, his original intention was that old Bowness should inherit. He was to die, leaving the property to young Bowness who was completely under Newley's thumb. . . . But the whole point of the scheme was that there should be no apparent connexion between Henstone's death and the will written on the wall. Little was a connexion. . . . And Henstone's dying words were another. He just had to make the best of them. But he still felt pretty safe. Bowness only knew him as Darnley. No one knew he'd been in communication with young Bowness at all. And neither the father nor the son could possibly have done the murder."

Cary nodded. "That's plain enough," he said.

"Yes, but Little was the fly in the ointment. He linked the two. And then he started to blackmail Mark—or to get ready to. I don't quite know what happened at this point. But I've an idea that Little also tried Newley. Anyway, somehow Newley got to know that Mark was to be taken to Broughton House to find the will—and he could only have learnt that from Little. . . . He wanted the will found, all right. But he didn't want to do the finding himself, or Bowness to do it."

"Why not let Mark go ahead, then?"

"Because he didn't know what Mark and Little would do with the will. . . . After all, they might have destroyed it. . . . I don't believe for a moment Mark would have done, but Newley couldn't be expected to appreciate that a man would lose a fortune rather than be dishonest. . . . So someone had to go there to stop it from happening. First of all he chose Kathleen Bramley; but he seems to have had his doubts whether she'd be enough. So he rang up Bowness, quite late on, told him that Little and Mark were going to destroy the will, and that he must stop them at all costs."

"Celia Vernon?"

"Went off her own bat as she said. . . . Then Bowness lost his head and exceeded his instructions by shooting Little and getting himself mortally wounded. . . . Incidentally, he quite spoilt the will—but no one tumbled to that. . . . All that was just the opposite of what Newley wanted. Not that he'd have shed any tears over Little's death because Little was giving the game away all round. But he didn't want any excitement there." He paused. "As a matter of fact, Little gave the game away to me. First of all, he called attention to Henstone's past. Then he dies, and leaves behind a distinctive sort of tool which obviously points to painting and decorating. . . . By the way, they sometimes call those things chisels."

Cary nodded. "But you got on to Bowness right away?" he said.

"Yes. Because of the peculiar circumstances which surrounded the house. You see, the will must be under the wall-paper, and the place had only been papered once in all those years. . . . And I remembered that Henstone had worked as a painter. Most people thought that meant 'artist', just as you thought 'writer' meant 'author'. . . . It was evident that if I could look at the firm's old books, I might get something. In fact, I stumbled on something much better. Bowness gave a good part of the show away."

"Wasn't it enough?"

"I wasn't sure. And, of course, I'd no idea that he'd drag Mark and the girl along. Apparently Mark showed some sign of remembering having heard that his uncle knew Bowness."

"Hardly a reason for killing him?"

"Newley didn't know how much he'd remember, and he decided to make a clean sweep. Now, since he'd decided to burn the house down, if Mark was burnt with it, everyone would say Mark had tried to burn the house and hadn't got out in time."

"It was a near thing." Cary frowned. "When I think of how I played the fool with that gun——"

"As it happened, the timing was perfect! Newley might have found some excuse for locking the door and having a can full of spirit on him. But he couldn't very well get out of it when they dashed out just as he lit it!"

"The spirit?"

"Was the caretaker's. There was a little cleaning done there occasionally, and they bought in bulk, of course."

Cary was still frowning. "It was an unnecessary risk for him to take?" he suggested.

"No. If I'd been speaking the truth, there wasn't much risk anyhow. The will was no good to him after young

Bowness died, as I said before, and it was a potential source of danger. It was quite sound, really, to destroy it."

Cary thought for a minute or two; then he mentioned another doubt.

"But Newley took us there?" he suggested. "Though he'd already sent Bowness to Broughton House."

"I don't think he was sure he had. I rather gather he had to leave a message, and thought it wouldn't be delivered in time. So he used us in desperation."

"Little would have given him away, if we'd caught him?"

"We weren't meant to catch him. The idea was that Bowness should frighten them off, after they'd given the show away about where the will was. Then, if they hadn't uncovered the will, he would."

"His fingerprints?"

"If he'd done it himself he could have spoilt them. . . . If anyone else had, there was the hope they wouldn't go low enough to uncover them. Of course, we can't be sure of everything, unless he speaks much more fully than he has done so far."

"The books weren't as helpful as you thought," Cary suggested. "They didn't, in fact, mention Newley's name at all. Why was that? Was he using a false name?"

"No. . . . The books didn't mention it because actually Newley wasn't employed by Bowness. But the house was absolutely new, and everything had to be done to it—including painting the names on the gates . . . I owe this, eventually, to old George who, fortunately, has a memory like a card index about everything that concerns the firm——"

Cary grunted. "Only it needs lubricating," he said.

"Yes. I had to . . . Well, just about that time, Bowness was without a single workman who was much good at lettering, so, of course, he sub-let that part of the job to another firm. Newley was working for them as a 'writer'

—a sign-writer, and he was sent to Broughton House. The record of the payment wasn't in Bowness's books because it was made to the firm, not Newley—I mean, we didn't spot it as being there."

"I still can't just see what happened," Cary said. "Would anyone be fool enough to make a will like that on a wall?"

"I don't see why not—as a joke. Newley was working there, I expect, and stopped work for the lunch hour or something like that. He began fooling around painting on the wall—and maybe they'd been discussing wills and so on. He was a man of some education, and he started to write that. . . . James Henstone, I imagine, was a very different sort of man then from what he was when he died. He entered into the spirit of the thing and signed it—and the others as witnesses. . . . I suppose the fact that he was just going to make a will, combined with Little's letter, made him think of it as he was dying."

"He could hardly have expected that it was still there?"

"I don't see why not. Paper-hangers often sign walls with the date—and you can read them years afterwards."

"He told Bembridge he'd never made a will."

"He didn't. . . . He said he'd never put pen to paper for that purpose—and it was true! He signed with a brush. . . . But his signature's quite distinctive, and would probably have been recognizable."

"And it would have been legal? Made as a joke, like that?"

"I don't see why not. The law doesn't expect you to make jokes about wills. . . . And if you happen to leave a will behind which you never meant to have executed, the odds are that the joke's on you."

"In fact, then, I suppose it was the will which Henstone was proposing to make which was the immediate cause of his death? I mean, at least it precipitated things."

"Yes. Henstone must have told him what he was going to do. Obviously that settled things in his mind. He'd

got until eleven-thirty that morning to kill Henstone, and he worked out the best way of doing it. He'd seen the medicine and linament brought in hundreds of times and knew all about it. I suppose that he'd somehow heard about the change in time of the dose. Naturally he couldn't count on the man he was going to murder dozing off as he did. But he could have managed easily enough—tipped over the medicine, and poured it out again himself. He generally wore gloves when he was out. All that was necessary was not to take his left glove off."

"Really, he managed very well," Cary said with a detached admiration. "In view of all the complicated circumstances he had to deal with——"

"Yes. Those, of course, were entirely due to Henstone's complicated and objectionable personality. It wouldn't have mattered when Henstone was killed—we should still have found plenty of people ready to kill him."

Cary puffed at his pipe for a moment. "You know," he said, "at one time I really thought that Henstone might have killed himself with a view to getting at Mark."

"He was quite equal to it—except in one thing. He hated the idea of dying more than he hated anything else. . . . By the way, you came nearest to catching Newley out—and at a time when it might have been very awkward!"

Cary reflected. "When?"

"When you asked him what time he overheard Mark and Little talking. He'd got to tell a lie for which he hadn't prepared the ground properly. . . . It might have been possible to prove Mark hadn't been out at that time. . . . And he might never have managed to lead us to Broughton House. We couldn't, without that, have convicted him of Henstone's murder, I'm pretty sure."

"Henstone's will was the deciding factor. But he'd

thought of it before. Would he have done it anyhow? The will had been there for years."

"Actually, without the will there were three reasons, which all pointed to an attempt being made pretty soon. First, it was only quite lately he got young Bowness sufficiently under his thumb. Secondly, old Bowness was on the point of dying, and he wouldn't have to hang about with the chance of the old man willing the money elsewhere. And thirdly, when Henstone turned on Mark and Carlton, I think he saw the red light himself. . . . He realized that James Henstone's malice was getting akin to insanity, and though he might seem indispensable the time might come when he had some dirty trick played on him. . . . And that's the lot, surely?"

"About the murder? Yes. . . . Only, why on earth was Mark so keen on not inheriting the cash?"

"That's one really comic feature about a nasty business." McCleod smiled. "I gather there had been a lovers' quarrel. . . . The haughty Celia refused to marry him for fear she should be suspected of gold-digging. So Mark decided to throw away the fortune. . . . All for love, in fact. Very touching."

"But he will get the money?"

"I'm pretty sure he will."

"And the girl?" Cary asked with some concern. He had his sentimental moments. Moreover, his experience of Mark in the past few days had convinced him that the young man needed someone to look after him. "She's thrown him over?"

"All the evidence is against it." McCleod pointed through the window. "I've been watching them for the past five minutes," he admitted.

Cary looked. It was a perfect Victorian setting of the romantic type. Below them was the rose garden, still with some lingering blossoms. The last rays of the setting sun shone on the stone bench beneath the arbour, and

also on Mark and Celia in very close proximity. Cary looked at them benignly for a moment; then gently drew the curtain to shut off McCleod's view.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he reproved. "Weren't you young yourself once? How would you like it?"

McCleod shook his head. "I'm still a bachelor," he said, "and hope to stay one. Still, if I did marry, I expect I'd follow the advice of the poet—as they've done."

"What's that?" Cary asked.

McCleod grinned. "'Don't 'ee marry for money, lad,'" he quoted, "'but go where money be!'"